Ahmed Elmezeny

The Complete Cost of Play

An Ethnography of Commercialization in Free-to-Play Game Culture

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1.0   Introduction

The work presented in this book is an ethnography of a free-to-play game, its players, community and online communication channels. The investigation of this game culture, which is a type of media culture, is conducted to look at a specific meta process: commercialization, or more precisely, the influence of utilizing the free-to-play business model in games.

This ethnography is an empirical work based on the scientific method, characterized by systematic observations, a position of skepticism adopted towards these observations, and the formulation and modification of research questions. Therefore, for the sake of coherence and clarity, the following book includes specific chapters which detail the scientific method adhered to in the current investigation.

1.1.   Popularity of Free-to-Play

In recent years, free-to-play gaming has been gaining popularity; it has become quite a common form of entertainment, present in most homes and pockets. This could be attributed to several factors, including modern developments in handheld and phone technologies, but it could also be credited to the widespread usage of smartphone devices worldwide.

Free-to-play (F2P) games utilize a business model commonly labelled 'freemium' in the business world. Freemium business models can be generally defined as those that provide a combination of products: one at no cost at all, and the other for different prices (Pujol, 2010). There are variations of this model, including providing the entire game or all of the software for free, and offering the core game for free, but requiring that in-game purchases or additional downloadable content (DLC) are made at a price. Within most mobile F2P games, the most common form of freemium is one that sees the core game provided for free and gives the user options for in-game purchases. These purchases are commonly referred to as microtransactions, and they are often used for either decorative or functional items that assist the user in the game.

There are several reasons for the popularity of the F2P model in the mobile games market, and, to a certain extent, even the regular console market. Part of the attractiveness of F2P in the games industry is due to a large portion of revenue in the market being generated by game app purchases (Puppe, 2018). While this includes the purchase of actual mobile games, it also covers both onetime and frequent microtransactions in F2P games. Moreover, this revenue does not factor in the amount generated from microtransactions in games which are not considered apps, and therefore do not fit the "game app" label, since there are also a large number of non-mobile games that use the F2P model as well. These include PC games of the battle arena genre, such as Fortnite (Epic Games, 2017), The League of Legends (Riot Games, 2009), Defense of the An-

cients 2 (Valve Corporation, 2013), Heroes of the Storm (Blizzard Entertainment, 2015), and even some Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs), like Guild Wars 2 (ArenaNet, 2012), EVE online (CCP Games, 2003), Maple Story 2 (NSquare, 2015) and Runescape (Jagex, 2001). With so many applications across numerous genres, the F2P model has become a common sight in the industry, and not just in the mobile gaming market. F2P games, while causing some debate among game users[1], have been mostly well-received; they have therefore caused the migration of players from the traditional games market, in a movement that started as early as 2004 (Lin & Sun, 2007).

With F2P games generating more revenue than traditional or subscription payment models in the market (Strickland, 2020), they have attracted the attention of both mobile and regular console developers. Most gaming industry professionals have positive stances towards F2P games (Alha, Koskinen, Paavilainen, Hamari & Kinnunen, 2014). In fact, the F2P model has now been implemented by several industry leaders, many of whom would never in the past have considered using the model for their games, the best example of which is Nintendo. While not utilizing the payment model for any of its console games specifically, the industry giant has released several F2P mobile games (in collaboration with smaller developers), which are intended to add to and support their existing intellectual properties. Nintendo's releases, such as Mario Run (Nintendo, 2016), Animal Crossing: Pocket Camp (NDcube, 2017), Pokémon: Go (Niantic, 2016), Pokémon Masters (DenA Co Ltd, 2019) and Fire Emblem Heroes (Intelligent Systems, 2017), are all games which utilize the company's well-established intellectual properties and the freemium business model to cultivate enormous communities of dedicated gamers, while also generating a vast amount of revenue. It was estimated that to date, various F2P Pokémon titles, which include Pokémon Shuffle (Genius Sonority, 2015), Go and Quest (Game Freak, 2018) but not Masters, have generated $2.5 billion (Cao, 2019). Pokémon Go is by far the most popular, with 550 million global downloads and $2.45 billion in revenue (ibid).

As illustrated through some of Nintendo's example games, even though F2P games exist on PCs and consoles, they are much more commonly found in the mobile market, by far. One could argue that this is purely because the mobile market has more releases and a higher turnover of games in comparison to the traditional or indie markets, both of which might require more financial investment and labor resources to develop each title. Nevertheless, the flurry of mobile and F2P games in today's gaming market could also be a sign of the casualization of the market, or the growing influx of video-game players, as well as less mentally taxing (in this case, F2P) games that are aimed

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[1] For a full overview of discourses and representations of F2P games in game culture, please refer to Subchapter 2.4.5.1.

at them. This transformation began as early as the mid-2000s, with online gaming portals featuring casual games, as opposed to their hardcore and engaging counterparts (Juul, 2010). However, the transformation has recently been picking up even more speed with the increasing penetration of F2P and casual games, a phenomenon that could possibly be attributed to the increasing diffusion of smartphones among individuals worldwide.

The fact that a majority of F2P games are played on mobile phones is another contributory factor to their popularity, due to ease of access. Smartphones are much more portable than consoles or PCs, and usually carried around by individuals throughout the day. This provides a person with several chances to fit a play session into their schedule. It might occur during their commute, while sitting in the waiting room at the doctor's office, or during lunch and coffee breaks. When compared to traditional console games, F2P/mobile games are not only more available, but can also provide a player with shorter and less engaging (casual) play sessions, making them more accessible to most individuals. One final reason that adds to the accessibility of F2P games is in the name itself: it is the price tag, the fact that they are free. Individuals do not have to commit to buying a certain F2P game just to try it out, as they would with console games. Hence, people can download as many F2P games as they like from the iOS and Google Play app stores, sample them and either continue playing them as they are, or make microtransactions to enhance them, if they enjoy the experience. Purchases do not necessarily have to be made in F2P games unless the user is sufficiently invested; this gives any user with a smartphone a vast library of games available to download and experience for free.

1.2.   New Generation of Players and Culture

One of the theories posited by this research is that the popularity and spread of F2P games, which can be partially attributed to the casual revolution described by Juul (2010), have created a whole new generation of gamers: both young ones growing up with the influx of F2P games, and new casual gamers recently introduced to the hobby. Compared to players of traditional pay-to-play and subscription games, it can be assumed that this new generation of players also has new playing styles and media practices that reflect the more casual nature and the business model utilized in F2P games, focused on more consumer-oriented play. This research attempts to characterize these players as part of a new subculture: F2P game culture, which could be defined as a slice of overall macro game culture[2], which it has the potential to change due to the total size of the subculture's population and the available products (games) on the market.

These assumptions regarding what we will term F2P culture, and its placement in overall macro game culture, create gaps in the current state of research that this study hopes to address, both concerning F2P game culture itself and the current or future state of macro game culture. These are gaps that need to be addressed by looking at F2P games and the various new media and cultural practices which accompany them. One such practice is virtual consumption. While capital accumulation is central to many games, and the process of purchasing items with fictional money might also be quite common, in F2P games, most virtual consumption usually comes at the expense of real money, which has "forced a re-evaluation of the status of fantastical consumption play," (Lehdonvirta, Willska & Johnson, 2009, p.1060). The real money trade of virtual assets (Lehdonvirta, 2005) paves the way for several phenomena that had not existed before in traditional games and their cultures, which should be analyzed to better understand F2P games and both their own and regular game cultures. For example, individuals will invariably interact differently and assign different (perhaps changeable) value or meaning to the virtual or digital objects they purchase, depending on whether or not the purchase is made with real money. While there have been some observational studies made on the matter regarding certain games, such as Farmville (Gruning, 2013), or Habbo Hotel (Lehdonvirta, et al., 2009), detailed studies that address virtual objects in free-to-play games, and how they interact with other cultural practices, have yet to be undertaken. This creates an explicit need to explore how players perceive and interact with objects in this game genre (Gruning, 2013).

Some virtual objects that can be purchased in F2P games largely perform decorative functions; however, most of the items purchased in these games provide some form of

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[2] For a detailed definition of game culture on the macro, micro and meso level, please refer to Subchapter 2.2

functional benefit. Depending on the game's design, purchasing benefits can become instrumental to victory in the game, and a central strategy for many players. Known as Pay-to-Win (P2W), this is a new sort of cultural practice that is unique to F2P games and results from their business model (Jordan, Wayne, Silva & Rosenbaum, 2016), which is yet to be thoroughly explored in game studies, or media and communication science literature.

It is evident that several aspects of F2P gaming focus on spending, and this is why numerous academics have raised the need for further research on various aspects of this matter. Alha et al. (2014), after speaking to gaming professionals, note that aggressive monetization in these games is seen as negative, and state there is a need for research on the ethically questionable subject of those who might spend too much. Jordan et al. (2016) echo these thoughts, noting that the model is yet to be domesticated, with unethical use being rampant. In the same vein, Evans (2015) states that there is a need for media and cultural studies to "consider the social, cultural, economic and political implications of impatience," (p.563) something frequently capitalized upon in these games to incentivize purchasing. For all these reasons, one could argue that F2P still needs proper regulatory procedures, which can only be achieved through the adequate examination of player and industry habits (Woodford, 2013).

In light of all these new cultural practices brought on by F2P games, and the business model itself, it is important to distinguish the transformations that are being made to individuals and gaming communities in various cultural contexts. F2P's repercussions on gameplay, an individual's identity, and the gaming community as a whole should also be thoroughly examined in light of its unique business approach, which is quite distinct from the traditional games that preceded it. One should be asking whether the different ways of play and various new practices introduced by F2P have led to the rise of a new culture altogether (F2P subculture), or to a transformation of the overall macro game culture instead. A change in ways of play and gameplay styles can, after all, also indicate a change in digital media culture itself (Evans, 2015, p.565).

Hence, there is a research gap that needs to be addressed, looking at the change in gameplay, and specifically looking at whether there is a trend towards more commercialized and consumer-oriented playstyles in the overall macro game culture. This needs to be further explored through observing the impact of the F2P business model on overall game culture. For example, is the business model transforming the practices of the entire industry? With the influx of F2P games, an entire future generation of individuals now exists that have started their gaming careers with these sorts of games. These individuals have arguably been exposed to a specific type of experience that is of a more consumer-oriented or commercialized nature than pre-existing, collaborative games. Therefore, when this new generation of gamers moves from F2P games into

traditional pay-to-play gaming spheres, they will bring their expectations of F2P games with them. To accommodate and cater to this rising generation of new audiences, perhaps producers and developers might begin to integrate characteristics from F2P games into traditional ones, or even focus entirely on creating F2P games with different levels of detail and complexity.

To a certain degree this trend can already be observed in the gaming industry, with developers borrowing certain characteristics from F2P games (P2W elements, seasonal content or even microtransactions) and utilizing them for pay-to-play games and triple-A titles. Examples of these types of games are abundant. One very recent example is Mortal Kombat 11 (NetherRealm Studios, 2019) on the Nintendo Switch, which encourages microtransactions to unlock additional items and skins after its initial box price. One publisher and developer notorious for implementing these kinds of microtransactions in their already-purchased games is Electronic Arts (EA). EA games such as Star Wars Battle Front II (DICE, 2017) or their sports games series like FIFA, NBA and Madden (but especially Battlefront II, which caused huge controversies after its initial release) have all garnered negative user and media attention for utilizing microtransactions to offer additional content that should ideally have been part of the main software, especially since players essentially spend €60 to purchase the game. Therefore, it is important to investigate the impact of the current F2P trend on the overall game industry, and to do so, this study proposes an approach that attempts to typify F2P game culture(s), their characteristics, and what possible influences they could have on overall macro game culture.

1.3.   Addressing Gaps in Media and Game Culture Research

This research also attempts to addresses a few gaps in literature concerning media/game cultures. As mentioned previously, sparse literature exists focusing on free-to-play culture, in both media and communication science and game studies research. Most existing literature researching free-to-play games observes specific game practices, like purchasing, the games image in public discourse, or certain game mechanics. There has yet to be a study that observes multiple aspects and contexts of free-to-play gaming simultaneously, attempting a comprehensive approach by studying the culture as a whole. This study attempts to address this gap through applying specific theoretical frameworks that observe free-to-play games in several possible contexts. More importantly, through a detailed ethnography of free-to-play culture, this study is able to bolster and update existing literature and theories on media culture. Through this research, one can document the new cultural practice of microtransactions, as well as other financial aspects (such as payment or budgeting), exploring how these practices relate to cultural manifestations.

Finally, as a consequence of investigating the financial aspect of free-to-play game culture, and how they relate to the identity of gamers or their gameplay, the role of the payment model in the value and meaning generated through media products (e.g. games) can be examined. This study hopes to expand on this literature, exploring how players feel about, and identify with their virtual goods or properties, and how their spending behavior influences these feelings.

The next chapter introduces the theoretical framework utilized in this study, highlighting primary theories and the core structure utilized in the investigation of free-to-play games and their culture. Afterwards, the research questions are introduced and explained in detail, clarifying the specific wording and scope covered by the question. The methods are then specified in details and background information is provided about the game selected for the ethnography, as well as the developer. The findings are then presented, and their implications are discussed in a subsequent chapter. Finally, the last chapter provides a wrap-up of the research along with an examination of its limitations and suggestions for possible future research.

2.0 The Cultures of Free-to-Play

The study of games has become increasingly common in recent years and for good reason: today, games are an established form of entertainment culture and have become a staple of the lives of individuals all over the world (Paavilainen et al., 2016). In Germany alone, there are a reported 34 million self-identified gamers, which constitutes around half of the entire population aged over 14 (Wilken, 2016).

The recent surge in videogame players can be attributed to the casualization of the gaming market, described by Juul (2012) as the 'casual revolution' in game culture. This process describes the growing market for casual games as beginning in the mid-2000s, as people began frequenting online game portals. Casual games can be differentiated from classically defined 'hardcore' games because they tend to have positive fiction, their gamers require less knowledge to play, and the games themselves need less of a time investment (Juul, 2012). One contributing factor to this casualization is considered to be the development and spread of mobile technology (Evans, 2015). With the spread of smart phones, individuals are now able to download countless apps on their phones that provide 'casual' gameplay, and that utilize both familiar and new economic strategies (ibid). Since casual game apps have become so common, monetization strategies are seen to be a "foundational ethos of the casual gaming market," (ibid. p. 578) helping competitors differentiate themselves and encouraging use of their products.

In addition to new economic models, like free-to-play, the casual revolution also brought about novel phenomena in gameplay. Villi Lehdonvirta (2005, 2009) documents one such phenomenon in his research on the real money trade of virtual assets. With so many different monetization strategies implemented in today's games, the purchasing of virtual assets (in both casual and hardcore games) has become normalized. Lehdonvirta (2005) analyzes how users feel about this sort of transaction, stating that it has the potential to break the magic circle[3] by helping players obtain assets that circumvent the rules; hence, some gamers consider virtual asset purchases a form of cheating (Lehdonvirta, 2005). Nevertheless, these opinions have not stopped the development of these transactions, and in recent years, "it has become increasingly common for virtual goods circulated in consumption games to be exchangeable for real money," (Lehdonvirta et al., 2009, p. 1059). The popularity of these payments, and other variations of the free-to-play model, has changed how the players of these games think about digital objects (Gruning, 2013). In addition to functional value, players also attach symbolic value to their digital goods (ibid), making them essential to social or identification practices of players and emphasizing the virtual game world as a much more con-

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[3] For a detailed definition of the magic circle see Subchapter 2.4.3.5.

crete part of real life. These new phenomena, which were not present in the days of classic box purchases of games, are not only changing the consumption of the game medium, but also overall game culture.

Casual games come in a variety of formats, platforms and genres, each catering to a different audience and gaming need, while utilizing different business models (Paavilainen et al., 2016). However, today most casual games tend to be synonymous with free-to-play games.

2.1. Free-to-Play as Casual Games

So, what exactly is a free-to-play game? Free-to-play games are mostly casual, applying a business model which has been around for a while, termed 'freemium'. This term designates "a business model using two products or services, or a combination of products and services. In such combinations, one item is provided at no charge while a complementary item is sold at a positive price," (Pujol, 2010, n.p). Freemium is present in a variety of services and products, such as social networks, mobile applications and desktop software. Chen & Wang's (2011) study on the social influence of being a paying user in freemium social networks found that "social connections and interactions with people paying for premium services may, to a great extent, influence the probability of free users to become pay users," (p. 526), noting not only distinctions in behavior between both types of users, but also their ability to influence each other.

Free-to-play games come in a variety of genres, ranging from simple puzzle games on mobiles to fully fledged massive multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) for the PC. What all these games share is that they employ the same revenue model, with varying levels of aggressiveness in their monetization, allowing developers to provide the majority of the content for free (Hamari, Keronen & Alha, 2015). This revenue model has even been credited with creating completely novel genres and "gameplay innovations that have brought completely new ways of playing games to the masses, breaking the trend in the industry where innovation has become rarer and rarer over the [sic] recent years," (Pirinen, 2016, p.51). This revenue model is anything but new in the gaming world, though, and has been around since RPG text adventures in 1997 (Järvinen, 2016). Free-to-play only hit mainstream success with the release of social network games on Facebook in 2008 (ibid). Nieborg credits the popularity of the model to Apple's introduction of in-app purchases in 2009: "a seemingly minor change, but one that laid the foundation for the free-to-play business model," (2015, p. 5). However, after a while, even major game companies such as Electronic Arts and Blizzard began to contemplate the revenue model, utilizing it as the default approach to its games (ibid). Today, with its increasing popularity in the games industry, free-to-play has become present on all game platforms and is "the dominant revenue model in the top grossing applications chart," (Alha et al., 2014, p. 1).

Free-to-play games differ from other revenue models in their design and development; they "offer an immediate and rewarding progress and achievement structure" which is "amplified and accelerated through micro-payments as part of the freemium pricing strategy and revenue model of game design," (Jordan et al., 2016, p. 2). To be effective, Nieborg suggests that companies need:

> (1) to aggregate large volumes of players because of the low rate of conversion into paying users, (2) to engage players in such a way that they enjoy playing and connect with other players, preferably via Facebook, (3) to retain players long enough for them to consider converting to becoming a paying user, and (4) to lower the barrier to (repeatedly) spend money (Nieborg, 2015, p. 6).

Hence, some professionals and academics argue that game development in F2P games is highly commercialized, "the game design is guided to a certain direction, and that games are designed on the basis of how much money they can make instead of creating good games," (Alha et al., 2014, p. 5). In addition to their design and ability to provide immediate gratification, the main difference between F2P games and traditional or subscription games is that they offer free access, while allowing the player to purchase in-game currency through in-game microtransactions. The in-game currency is then used to purchase virtual items in the game. Items purchased can be divided into two main categories: a) functional items, which assist the player in furthering their gameplay through increasing stats, or helping in-game timers deplete faster, or b) decorative items, which are mostly used to change aesthetics or provide additional social/communicational tools (Lin & Sun, 2007). The prevalence and popularity of free-to-play games has introduced economic strategies which "have shaped and promoted particular forms of gameplay," (Evans, 2015, p. 565). While many traditional and subscription MMORPGs provide virtual items for purchase with real money, the development of F2P games is known to exploit essential tools in gameplay, such as guild management tools (Ducheneaut, Nickell & Moore, 2007), providing them only for those who are willing to pay. Monetizing essential elements in gameplay, as F2P games do, is changing the experience of games, and in the worst case "gaming becomes a 'pay to win' affair, in which the players who pay the most perform the best," (Bogost, 2014, p. 4).

Most, but not all, F2P games contain similar characteristics to social games (see Figure 1). While there are several exceptions to this, primarily MMORPGs or first person shooters (FPS) that use the revenue model, the majority of top grossing games on mobiles seem to have social game characteristics (Chen, Lu & Wang, 2016). Looking specifically at sociability in free-to-play social games, Paavilainen et al. (2016) propose 30 different social features, such as: off-game sociability, presence information, scorekeeping and social UI elements. Their research indicates that in these types of game, sociability is based on communicating presence, and not so much social interaction (ibid). This type of sociality might not really contribute to generating bonding (or even bridging) social capital[4] (Steinkühler and Williams, 2006), since all it involves is requesting help from friends or sharing scores. This could be seen as the commodification of social interaction (Nieborg, 2015), where friends are nothing more than resources. Burroughs

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[4] For a detailed overview of bridging and bonding social capital refer to Subchapter 2.4.3.2.

(2014) notes this commodification of ludic sociality through noting consumer rituals, which are considered by some to be meaningful exchanges between players (such as gifting virtual objects).

Most games within this revenue model provide ongoing game worlds (similar to MMORPGS) that never seem to end (Evans, 2015). These game worlds, where new content is constantly published, render F2P games more akin to services than products, constituting "a more open-ended approach to game design [that] is indicative of a wider industry shift of product-based companies that are increasingly moving toward service-based business models," (Nieborg, 2015, p. 6). This is why great emphasis is put on customer service and community management by some free-to-play companies (Alha et al. 2014), hoping to influence the attitudes of their players and general gamers alike.
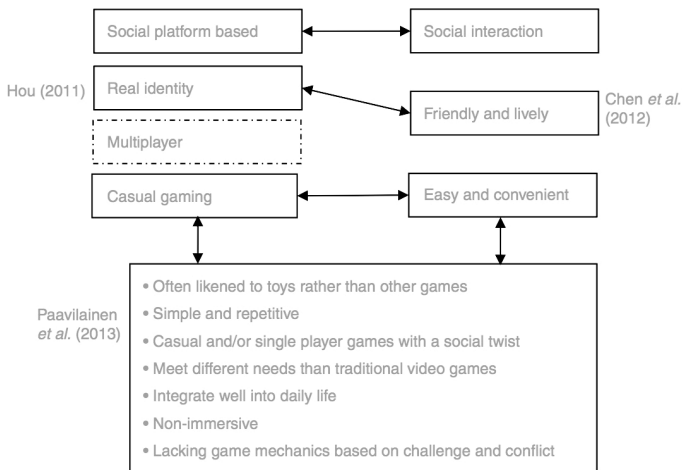
Hou (2011)

| Social platform based | ⟷ | Social interaction |

| Real identity |

Chen *et al.* (2012)

| Friendly and lively |

| Multiplayer |

| Casual gaming | ⟷ | Easy and convenient |

Paavilainen *et al.* (2013)

- Often likened to toys rather than other games
- Simple and repetitive
- Casual and/or single player games with a social twist
- Meet different needs than traditional video games
- Integrate well into daily life
- Non-immersive
- Lacking game mechanics based on challenge and conflict

Figure 1: Social Game Characteristics. (Chen et al., 2016, p.102).

Nevertheless, free-to-play is not entirely negative. The revenue model allows for easy access (Jordan et al., 2016) and provides the majority of the content for free. Free access means that free-to-play game worlds are more populated, providing a more social and attractive environment for their players. Moreover, this generates promotion and monetary profit for the company as well (Nieborg, 2015). Some even assume that the future of hardcore MMORPGs resides in free-to-play: "the future MMORPG markets will be characterized as casual, accessible and F2P utilizing the easy to learn, but hard to master principle," (ibid, p. 2).

Still, the outbreak of freemium games in today's market proves Juul's (2010) concept of the casual revolution, indicating a shift in current game and media culture. This shift in game culture, and its repercussions, should be investigated thoroughly to understand its social and scientific significance.

2.2.   Media and Game Cultures

Game cultures are considered types of digital media culture, with sets of beliefs, value systems and behaviors adopted, practiced and displayed in mediums including digital devices, online spaces and computer-mediated communication. This is aligned with the broader meaning of culture, which includes the production of symbolic meaning, not just material production and methods of development (Crawford & Rutter, 2006). These media cultures come in various forms and can revolve around different artifacts, from games to social media platforms, the common factor being that their primary resources of meaning are offered through technical communication media (Hepp, 2008). However, in cultural studies, media culture (or sometimes mass culture) refers to Western society and the consumer ideology that developed through the influence of mass media (Thomas, 2012).

From an analytical perspective, and based on Hepp's (2008) work, Wimmer (2012) defines game cultures as an aspect of this current media culture, "with increasing significance, whose primary resources of meaning are manifested in digital games that are mostly mediated or provided through technical communication media such as handhelds or consoles," (p. 527). From this definition, one can understand game cultures as the various ways and sometimes highly complex practices involved in the everyday use of games, their varied experiences, and their integration in gamers' daily lives (Wimmer, 2012). Here, game culture can be observed on the macro level, or the overall game culture, which is part of current media or mass culture.

Offering another definition of game culture and building on the study findings of several authors, Mäyrä (2008) differentiates game cultures as specific subcultures, each unique in their form of game appropriation: "Game cultures are often recognized as subcultures organized around games and playing, bringing together enthusiastic players who organize in their speech and behavior the meanings attached to these play forms," (p. 28). Adopting the same approach, Shaw (2010) reviews various definitions of the term in academia and public discourse and concludes that game culture is defined based on who plays (female or LGBT gamers), what they play (game specific cultures) or how they play (console, PC gamers or modders). She additionally notes that game culture is almost always defined as being separate from a "constructed mainstream culture," (Shaw, 2010, p. 416). Defining game cultures in this manner assumes that in addition to an overall macro game culture, there are diverse and distinct sub-cultures:

> Rather than a single 'game culture,' there are several of them, as visible and invisible sense- making structures that surface not only in games themselves, but in the language, practices, and sensibilities adopted and developed by groups and individuals, (Mäyrä, 2006, p. 103).

When defining game cultures as subcultures, we can do so on the micro, meso or macro level. As in the social sciences, the micro, meso and macro levels can refer to the individual, a group of actors, or the community as a whole (Quandt & Scheufele, 2011). However, this system can also be adapted to refer to different abstractions, as implemented by Quandt and Scheufele (2011) when using these levels to discuss networks, applying the micro and macro level as central coordinates. Concerning game cultures, one can observe their manifestation on a micro level as individual game cultures (built around specific games), or on a meso level as game meta cultures that are centered on technological aspects and ways of play (console gamers, free-to-play, modders, speed runners or streamers). On the macro level, game culture can be considered that of overall target population, or in general worldwide (Elmezeny & Wimmer, 2018). For specific examples, and a complete approach to defining game culture on various levels, please refer to Table 1 below.

Online gaming communities offer the most obvious demonstration of game culture. An important part of online gaming communities is the existence of a shared space, which according to Mäyrä (2008) is characteristic of a specific culture. With most digital games, spaces do not necessarily have to be physical, as a type of digital media culture; some game communities primarily share virtual spaces (not just game worlds, but also forums and chat rooms). Hence, it is beneficial to describe them as imagined communities (Anderson, 1991). These communities, unlike typical ones, cannot be based on daily face-to-face interaction between their members, due to practical and spatial reasons (ibid).

Table 1: Various levels of defining game culture adapted from Elmezeny and Wimmer (2018, p.82)

	Description	Example cultures
Micro	Cultures of a specific game or community, can be geographically based	World of Warcraft culture, EVE online culture, California Smash Brothers culture, German FIFA culture.
Meso	Cultures of multiple games or communities with a common, unifying characteristic	PS4 gamer culture, Nintendo gamer culture, Retro gamer culture, Modder culture, Hacker culture, Speed Runner culture.
Macro	The overall culture of all games, gamers and gameplay	Game culture worldwide, or game culture of specific populations.

Plenty of research on games focuses on the interaction between the player and the game itself. While this is appropriate for studying various phenomena, it still omits certain contexts. Kline & De Peuter (2003) argue "that the moment of gameplay is constructed by and embedded in much larger circuits – technological, cultural and market-

ing…" (p. 270). Hence, one can assume the importance of observing game culture as a whole, taking its many contexts into consideration, especially economic ones, instead of simply focusing on the player and game interaction. A great example of one such context is stated by Evans (2015): "From the early days of digital games' industrialization, there has been a link between economic strategies, upfront costs and gameplay, and this link continues to play out in contemporary games culture," (p. 566). Analyzing Candy Crush, a free-to-play game, David Nieborg (2015) also notes the importance of economic strategies in game practices, particularly the commodification of virtual items and ludic sociality.

Considering the importance of economic contexts on game culture, one of the proposed goals of this research is to typify F2P games as a distinct subculture. This categorization would appear on the meso level with the payment model as the unifying feature, as free-to-play games can also manifest individual cultures specific to the game. Still, each unique micro-culture would share some characteristics with other F2P games, based on cultural practices that arise from the application of the payment model.

2.2.1. Commercialization of Media and Game Cultures

Why is typifying free-to-play game culture so important? One possible (and evident) reason for undertaking this task is to indicate the increasing transformations that metaprocesses such as individualization, globalization, but most importantly commercialization bring to media and game cultures. Media cultures (of which game cultures are one variety) serve as visible case examples of the meta-process of mediatization: "media cultures are the cultures of mediatization," (Hepp, 2011, p. 29). To be specific, mediatization is a major development defined as:

> not only a process of upcoming new media and the coming into existence of an increasingly complex individual media environment. It is not only a process of 'more and more' media used in communicative action, but also and especially it is a metaprocess that consists of a changing everyday life, of changing identity constructions and social relations, of a changing economy, democracy and leisure, of a changing culture and society as a whole (Krotz & Hepp, 2011, p. 139).

Being cultures of mediatization, media cultures (and game cultures) can exhibit this metaprocess and the increasing influence, or integration, of media in our daily lives exceptionally well. However, these cultures make other metaprocesses such as commercialization observable as well (Hutchins, 2008; Simons, 2006).

In the case of F2P games (and their cultures), commercialization is the most important metaprocess since the majority of games applying this model seem to have mechanics that tend to encourage spending and other consumer behaviors. Moreover, commercialization is the most empirically observable metaprocess because it is the most conceiva-

ble given the cultural practices linked to financial aspects within the game community. Finally, while all metaprocesses are equally important, one cannot overstate the importance of commercialization given our existence in a capitalistic society (Krotz, 2007). In fact, all metaprocesses such as mediatization, etc., depend on an economic factor to a certain degree, and hence commercialization "is the basic process providing the stimulus to all action" (Krotz, 2007, p.259).

Commercialization itself can be seen as a process where "economy becomes more important, not only for the way in which culture and society work, but also for strategies of organizations and institutions and as reasons and goals of the actions of the people," (Krotz, 2007, p. 258). What Krotz means by economy here can be interpreted as a focus on fiscal success. Game cultures are generally thought of as participatory cultures (Jenkins, 2006), providing overt forms of social resistance (de Certeau, 1984) such as user and fan-generated content. But do the cultures of free-to-play games also fit this definition? Or are they inherently something different? The different gaming mechanics could highlight the process of commercialization and pinpoint F2P game culture as being more consumer than participatory, a culture that is heavily based on "shopping activities and the geography of retail space," (McAllister, 2003, p. 43). In order to answer these questions, a thorough look at the various contexts of F2P games is required. Through this inquiry, one could possibly observe various phenomena which can typify the culture of free-to-play games as something different and more commercialized than classic, pay-to-play games.

Still, this is not to say that regular pay-to-play games are completely uncommercial. Critics of game cultures will lump them in with popular culture, which is criticized for its role in preserving capitalism and oppressing the masses (Crawford & Rutter, 2006). This is as evident in the gaming industry as it is with other popular culture industries, where the focus is usually on profit and market exploitation, not creativity (Adorno, 1991). Scholars from the Birmingham School echo these thoughts with their claims that "culture is used to maintain the existing status quo and promote dominant capitalist values," (Crawford & Rutter, 2006, p. 152). It is not difficult to make these assumptions regarding the regular gaming industry, where several games are based on improving your avatar through the accumulation of virtual capital. However, this could not possibly be truer for the F2P market, where not only does virtual capital play a bigger role, but one that is acquired through real-world funds. Additionally, in the F2P market, variation is rarely a reflection of creativity in development (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1972), but is usually used to target various sections of the market, from casual to hardcore, or other niche interest gamers. Moreover, within F2P game communities, it is assumed that there are fewer 'counter cultures' (Cohen, 1980) or subcultures of resistance, such as hackers and modders, who display principles contrary to the dominant societal ideology. The lack of resistance makes F2P games and their cultures the perfect delivery vehicle for consumerist ideo-

logies. Alternatively, F2P games and their cultures could just be an accurate reflection of our own contemporary consumer society, which Bauman (1998) defines as one that is built on unfulfillable desires.

2.2.2. Mediatized Worlds: Empirical Observations of Metaprocesses

The empirical analysis of all-encompassing processes such as mediatization, or commercialization in this case, is a complex task. However, Hepp and Krotz (2014) provide a beneficial framework that serves as a starting point in the empirical analysis of such metaprocesses. While mediatization is not the core metaprocess of interest in this study, their proposed concept still shares a lot of similarities with similar frameworks utilized in this research and could be of benefit in observing the metaprocess of commercialization. 'Mediatized worlds' is a concept that refers to 1) social phenomology and 2) symbolic interactionism (Hepp & Krotz, 2014). Concerning phenomology, the term designates the division of everyday social life-worlds into multiple smaller versions, such as: jobs, social activities and schools. Within these worlds, individuals are confronted with socially "constructed part-time realities" (Hitzler & Honer, 1964, p. 87 as cited in Hepp & Krotz, 2014), temporally existing in a specific space, which have an increasing impact in today's postmodern society.

Regarding symbolic interactionism, there are three major considerations to do with mediatized worlds. Firstly, mediatized worlds are communicative networks "beyond the territorial" (Hepp & Krotz, 2014, p. 12). This is similar to Anderson's (1991) concept of imagined communities, meaning that the mediatized world of stocks (the example given) is manifested wherever stocks are exchanged with computers, smartphones and other technological devices: "It is the mediatized communication network by which this mediatized world gets constructed, not a territoriality," (ibid, p. 12). Secondly, mediatized worlds can exist on "various scales" (ibid, p. 13), similar to social worlds, and can either be very localized or entirely global, defined by a research perspective and a thematic core. This thought is comparable to Elmezeny and Wimmer's (2018) micro/meso/macro definition and comparison of game culture, as stated earlier. Finally, mediatized worlds are "nestled/interlaced with each other" (Hepp & Krotz, 2014, p. 13), meaning that within each mediatized world exists sub-worlds or connections with other similar worlds. The authors give the example of musical subgenres: "popular cultural scenes like hip hop, black metal or techno … The ongoing articulation of their mediatized worlds is a likewise ongoing segmentation and (re)invention process," (ibid, p. 14). This, again, slightly compares to the subculture concept of game cultures proposed by Mäyra (2006).

Overall, given these considerations, the concept of mediatized worlds provides a framework for the empirical observation of mediatization and other metaprocesses, such as commercialization:

> They are structured fragments of social lifeworlds with a certain binding
> intersubjective knowledge inventory, with specific social practices and cultural thick-
> enings. Mediatized worlds are the everyday concretization of media cultures and
> media societies. They are the level where mediatization becomes concrete, where
> people use media in specific contexts and with specific interests and intentions, and
> by virtue of this can be analyzed empirically. (Hepp and Krotz, 2014, p. 14).

This is due to the mediatized world's ability to provide an opportunity to observe specific practices and situations that articulate mediatization, commercialization and other greater metaprocesses. For example, it is an impossible task to attempt to analyze the primary process of commercialization concerning media culture, or the entire games industry. However, using media worlds, which serve as a theoretical basis and an empirically observable concept of the subculture typification given to game cultures (Mäyrä, 2008), one can pinpoint certain progressions, whether practices or phenomena, which highlight these metaprocesses.

2.2.3. Translating Practices to Culture

Media practices are an important part of media/game cultures. In a sense, they are the observable and measurable ways in which we can directly witness different media/game cultures and their sub-manifestations. Steele and Brown's (1995) media practice model provides one possible framework that proves useful in highlighting the various practices which contribute to the production of meaning in media cultures. While their framework stems from media effects research, attempting to explain media usage, it still incorporates vital practices (selection, interaction, application/appropriation). These "everyday activities and routines of media consumption," (Steele & Brown, 1995, p. 553) are the central focus of the framework, and essential in explaining the process of creating meaning in cultures that revolve around certain digital mediums. Steele and Brown also note that their model's central component is the formation of identity:

> Teens' sense of who they are shapes their encounters with media, and those en-
> counters in turn shape their sense of themselves in the ongoing process of cultural
> production and reproduction (Steele & Brown, 1995, p. 554).

Members of media/game cultures (including, it is assumed, F2P ones) are bound to have specific practices that signal their inclusion. For example, members of specific game cultures have their own jargon, don specific clothes and utilize exclusive channels of communication (Elmezeny & Wimmer, 2016). These practices can highlight the meaning-making processes of individuals engaged in a variety of activities, whether through the selection, interaction and appropriation of media, as Steele and Brown (1995) state, or even in more extensive contexts.

Taking a different approach, Couldry (2004) theorizes that media (an obvious central component of media culture) is itself a practice. He also discusses the importance of media practices, especially when it comes to their role of arranging other social practices. Drawing on social theory and Durkheim's (1953) concept of social categories, Couldry (2004) puts forward the concept of rituals, in attempting to explain "the binding authority of certain media practices in relation to other practices," (p. 127). He goes on to state that during rituals, wider patterns of meaning are enacted by participants unintentionally, making rituals "one important way in which the legitimacy of assumed wider values can be confirmed or communicated," (ibid, p. 127). Couldry (2004) also notes that ritual practices contribute to connecting other practices of an individual that involve similar categories and values.

Hence, this research views culture as a totality of media practices based on both Couldry's (2004) framework of rituals, tied to other social situations, and Steel and Brown's (1995) structure of media practices as everyday media consumption, tied to identity construction. These media practices make up the specific mean-making processes of culture and can be categorized into five different contexts known as the circuit of culture. This understanding of culture makes it empirically observable. Through looking at the practices that make culture tangible, studying transformations brought on by certain metaprocesses becomes plausible.

2.3   The Circuit of Culture

In order to typify F2P game culture, we have to observe the major cultural processes that occur surrounding these media products. The circuit of culture (Paul du Gay, Stuart Hall, Linda Janes, Hugh Mackay and Keith Negus, 1997) is best described as a framework which assists in the investigation of the "production and circulation of meaning," (Leve, 2012, p. 2). This framework comes from the specific branch of research known as cultural studies.

Contrary to popular belief, cultural studies is not simply the "study of culture" (Barker, 2003, p. 5). Culture can be more accurately "understood as the processes of meaning-making'' (Lewis, 2002, p. 3). Observing a more constructivist than reflective approach to cultural activities (see Hall, 1997, p. 24-25), structures such as politics, the economy and various societal formations become less reflective and more imagined, "given meaning through the process of culture," (Champ and Brooks, 2010, p. 574). Culture has the power to bring meaning into existence (ibid). The ultimate goal of cultural studies is therefore to articulate something about meaning and "to attempt to capture a sense of meaningful social processes" (ibid. p. 574). It is for these reasons that du Gay and his colleagues (1997) developed the circuit: as a visual representation to answer the question of how meaning is created and shared within, and between, cultures.

2.3.1. History of the Circuit

The circuit of culture was originally developed as a cultural analysis tool by the members of the British Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), and later served as the theoretical basis of the 1997 Culture, Media & Identities series published through Sage & Open University (Leve, 2012). Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model, which was established during his time at the CCCS "is said to have been a precursor to later circuit models developed by cultural theorists," (Leve, 2012, p. 2). Richard Johnson (1986) was one cultural theorist among several (Pillai, 1992; Wren-Lewis, 1983; Morley and Chen, 1996) who found Hall's model lacking, having, to their minds, insufficient conceptual distinctions.

It was Johnson (1986) who developed the primary version of the circuit of culture (see Figure 2), his goal being to create a heuristic guide to tackling cultural analysis from various perspectives. While several theories had already been put forward to explain cultural processes, Johnson (1986) was candid about his fears that they were insufficient, framing them as a rhetorical question: could they be "all false or incomplete, liable to mislead, in that they are only partial, and therefore cannot grasp the process as a whole?" (p. 46). Here we can see that the core of the circuit and its rationale, even in its earliest form, was to attempt to capture the totality of cultural processes. Furthermore, Johnson's original model was developed due to the need he identified to address "a

neglect of the 'private' - the choices made by consumers and the basis of those choices, or 'modes of reception', so that processes of production tended to be the dominant focus," (Leve, 2012, p. 3). The earliest version of the circuit of culture was Johnson's attempt at refocusing cultural studies, especially those with texts as research objects. In order to accomplish this aim, one must have the proper investigative goals to clarify "the social life of subjective forms at each moment of their circulation, including their textual embodiments," (Johnson, 1986, p. 62). This, in turn, leads to an understanding of the added importance of context, due to its ability to determine "meaning(s), transformations and salience of these forms, including the contexts of immediate situations, as well as the larger historical context or conjuncture," (Leve, 2012, p. 3).
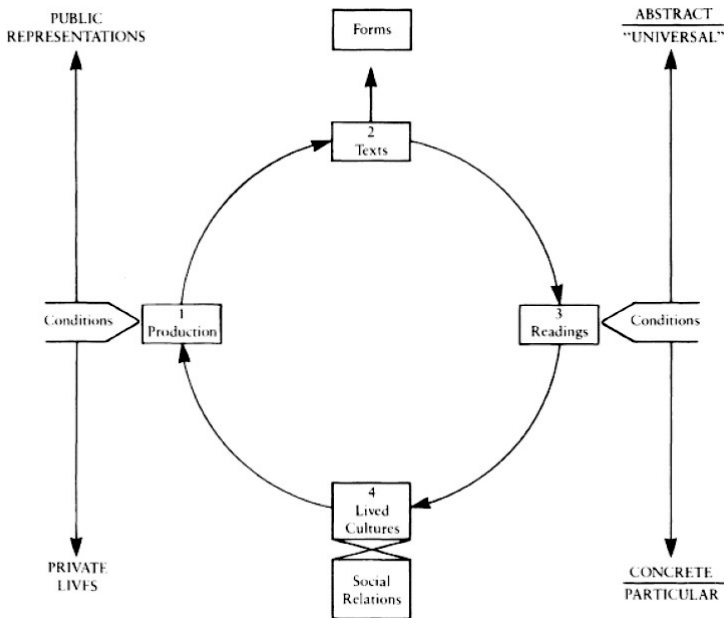
Figure 2: First conception of the Circuit of Culture (reprinted from Johnson, 1986, p. 46)

Du Gay et al. (1997) later simplified Johnson's model to create the final circuit of culture (see Figure 3). They propose five processes, which, when taken together, comprise the entire circuit of culture. The simplifications remove the abstract/concrete and public/private dichotomies from Johnson's (1986) model, integrate 'conditions' as one of the now five contexts (regulation) and highlight "the interconnections that link each of the five [contexts] to the others," (Leve, 2012, p. 4). In the final, simplified circuit of culture, texts/forms become representation, readings become consumption, conditions become

regulation, lived cultures/social reality becomes identity, and construction is production (ibid).

2.3.2. Using the Circuit

Within du Gay et al.'s (1997) circuit, the five nodes (or contexts, which is how they will be referred to in this study) each deal with a distinct part of how to generate meaning. Representation deals with deriving meaning from how concepts are presented (Hall, 1997). This process naturally addresses aspects that include both written and visual language: words, gestures, music, video and photography. "Languages establish and essentially hold meanings in place by defining how things and concepts are different or similar to other things and concepts," (Champ and Brock, 2010, p. 575).

Identity consists of the processes whereby "represented meanings" (ibid) or what du Gay et al. (1997) call "social profiles" (p. 10) and "types" (p. 15) are utilized to give meaning both to ourselves and our social groups, and to other individuals and their own formations. Identities are not exclusive to human beings, and can be given to things, locations, animals and experiences (Champ and Brock, 2010).

The production process (or context) can be simply understood as the creation of things, which not only includes products, but also messages, ideas and experiences (ibid). While most examples of this process notably feature it at the institutional level (ibid), it can also take place at the singular level, with individual or community-created content, messages and experiences, something that has become much more relevant in the age of social media.

The consumption context looks at how individuals make sense of their experiences, or consume meaning. The process of consumption as a meaningful process has been largely ignored by many researchers (Mackay, 1997). However, a shift in cultural studies has given rise to the importance of consumption as a necessary process when it comes to deriving meaning (Champ and Brock, 2010). Arguing based on his encoding/decoding model, Hall (1980) noted that individuals can accept meaning as it was planned by its authors (the preferred reading). Alternatively, they can "negotiate with that meaning," (Champ and Brock, 2010, p. 576) choosing the parts of it that suit them. Or they can discard the meaning completely.

Regulation is the final process mentioned as part of the circuit; it denotes attempts to repair or curb meanings that do not fit within our regular understanding of production and consumption (Thompson, 1997). This usually entails formal institutions, at the local, government, or international levels, enforcing rules and regulations.

In their book, du Gay et al. (1997) study the culture of the Sony Walkman. Using this circuit, they look at how it is represented, produced, consumed, the means employed to regulate its use and distribution, and which social identities are associated with it. For any cultural artifact to be studied adequately, it must pass through the five cultural processes of representation, identification, production, consumption and regulation (ibid, p. 3). du Gay et al. (1997) note additionally that due to the nature of this model, it does not matter which process you start with, as the circuit will not be complete until all processes have been discussed. The processes do not follow a specific order: they "need not follow in succession" and "[a]ny process may interrelate with any other, depending upon cultural circumstances," (Champ and Brock, 2010, p. 577). Moreover, once a researcher is finished with a certain process, it does not signal the end of it. Instead, one process carries over into the next, so they are overlapping constantly: "each part of the circuit is taken up and reappears in the next part. So, having started with Representation, representations become an element in the next part, that is, of how Identities are constructed. And so on." (du Gay et al., p. 4).
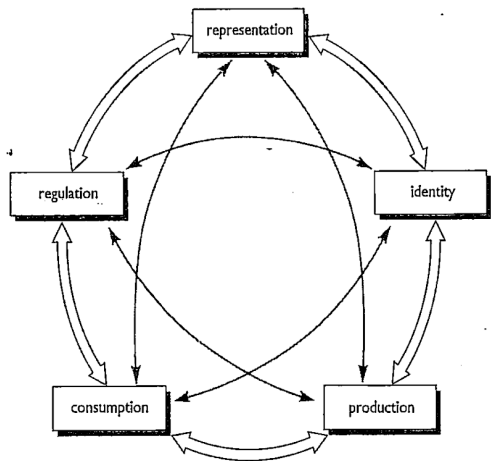
Figure 3: The Circuit of Culture (reprinted from du Gay et al., 1997, p. 3).

In addition to du Gay et al.'s (1997) work on the Walkman, the circuit of culture has also served as the theoretical basis for several other scientific pursuits. Studies utilizing the circuit have applied it to: science journalism (Wilcox, 2003), advertising (Soar, 2000), public relations (Curtin and Gaither, 2005), men's lifestyle publications (Benwell, 2003), telenovelas (Acosta-Alzuru, 2003), and the music industry (Fraley, 2003). Outside the realm of media and communication science, the circuit of culture has been used as a theoretical foundation to research tourism (Norton, 1996), human geography (Squire,

1993) and, most recently, environmental issues such as wildland fires (Champ and Brock, 2010).

Nevertheless, within game studies, the circuit of culture is underutilized. Still, advocates of this theoretical concept include Wimmer (2012) and Mäyra (2008), both of whom have applied the circuit to their own research and expanded upon it, adapting it for use with digital games (see below), and stressing the importance of context[5].

2.3.3. Applying the Circuit to Digital Games

Building on the circuit of culture and Hepp's (2008) cultural theories in communication science, Wimmer (2012) highlights two essential analytical considerations for this research: One, the circuit assists in observing the process of constructing digital game cultures, and two, it denotes "the constantly prevailing economic context of the gaming industry," (p. 528). Originally, Hepp (2011) observes that the articulation of meaning in media cultures is a complex circuit, within which different levels exist: the articulation of production, representation, appropriation, identification and regulation. Hepp (2011) then observes certain key distinctions between the classic media circuit and its application to digital games, renaming certain processes (primarily consumption, which he renames as appropriation, since games are not likely to perish once consumed and are more accurately described as being appropriated into daily life instead). Wimmer (2012) applies the five processes to the realm of digital games as follows:

- The context of (re)production, of and within digital games, deals with the structures, means and methods of creating games and play. This context is not limited to the gaming industry and the field of game development alone, but also deals with user-generated game products, hence the addition of the "re" prefix.
- The context of representation not only deals with the depiction of digital games and their cultures in public discourse and mass media, but also with the illustration of different topics in games (media products) themselves. These topics could include anything from violence to family values or gender roles, as represented in digital games.
- Regulation, as a context, involves the effect of non-producing institutions, like political or governmental institutions, on a media culture. With digital games, this usually deals with issues such as age restrictions for games and the Entertainment Software Rating Board's (ESRB) ratings.
- The context of appropriation highlights the practices where media is embedded in daily life. Within the realm of digital games, Wimmer (ibid) gives the example of game-specific rules and rituals, e.g. clans.

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[5] See subchapter 2.4.

- Finally, the context of identification notes the ongoing process of building identity based on the dialogues or patterns being communicated in games. The process is best observed when gamers wear special clothes or use jargon to display their membership in a community, or to differentiate themselves from non-gamers. (Wimmer, 2012).

Using these five processes, we establish certain contexts within which one should be studying digital game practices, or in this case free-to-play games, in order for them to be analyzed adequately. Contexts are adaptations of nodes, the original terminology applied to the five points of the circuit of culture. However, it is important to note that cultural practices and phenomena do not have to strictly adhere to one context or the other; sometimes certain overlaps will occur. Those who advocate the usage of the circuit of culture note that it is too simplistic to specify that a process be used exclusively within one particular context (Champ and Brock, 2010). This is to be expected when dealing with cultural and social analysis, where clear and distinct lines between phenomena are uncommon (Leve, 2012). In fact, some social scientists find that "it is the researcher's task to identify and describe how particular meanings result from the overlap of these [contexts]," (Champ and Brock, 2010, p. 576).

2.3.4. The Circuit Compared to Other Approaches in Game Studies

Applying the circuit of culture as an analytical construct is extremely advantageous in game studies as it combines several traditional approaches to examining games, thus offering a more comprehensive overview. Previous games research has either taken a structural approach, viewing games as tools that feed player experiences (Juul, 2012), or a player-centered approach, by putting player experience and activities at the center of research (Consalvo, 2007; Castronova, 2005). However, while each of these approaches has its use, both have an inherent determinism (Jordan et al., 2016). According to Behrenshausen (2012) videogames are a collection of varied forces, "human and nonhuman bodies, algorithmic logics, circuitry, enunciations, marketing discourses, juridical codifications, mythic narratives, architectural formations, affects, flows of both electricity and capital," (p. 882). If we assume this to be true, the circuit of culture would be an apt tool to both classify and study these diverse forces in detail.

Other common approaches in game studies include: effects research, which primarily attempts to measure video games' outcomes on aggression (Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Funk, 1992; Sherry, 2001); uses and gratifications approaches (Jansz & Martens, 2005; Lucas & Sherry, 2004), which attempt to explain the reasoning behind the decisions and preferences of gamers; and media psychological approaches, which try to answer a variety of questions ranging from identification with in-game avatars (Van

Looy, Courtois & De Vocht, 2010) to what it means to be a 'gamer' in the first place (De Grove, Courtois, & Van Looy, 2015).

What most of these approaches share is that they are player- or media-centered, putting the player experience or the medium itself as their highest priority. As mentioned earlier, while this can be beneficial when it comes to answering certain questions, it is still deterministic to a certain degree, disregarding other possible influential factors and contexts. For example, assuming that video games are the main contributor to an individual's aggressive behavior, without taking into consideration issues such as how the player processes particular messages within the game itself, identifies with specific characters, or relates to others within the community who play the same game, can be misleading. In subscribing to a partial explanation for an individual's aggressive behavior, researchers could be ignoring a variety of other factors that might also be playing a contributory role. The circuit of culture can remedy these errors, due to the various contexts and connections it employs. When properly applied, an empirical study utilizing the circuit can address not only the player experience, but the various contextual interactions and practices arising from the game itself, as well as the surrounding communities where the game is communicated and circulated.

2.3.5. Critiquing the Circuit

Still the circuit of culture is not without its faults. Ben Fine (2002), an economist and theorist, does not find the circuit an actual theoretical concept, stating that it is "little more than metaphor, an organized recognition of the different sites at which culture is generated and mutually determined," (p. 107). Moreover, Fine (2002), and other academics (Negus, 1997; Mackay, 1997 as cited in Leve, 2012, p. 4) have criticized the circuit of culture for observing the "circular journey of the commodity itself," (Leve, 2012, p. 4) rather than the various processes of culture. Nevertheless, this circulation of commodities is not completely separate from cultural content or production, and Fine also points out:

> As the commodity moves through…it picks up and transforms culture along the way. This offers the opportunity to examine cultural content in a piecemeal fashion, with more or less acknowledgement of the interrelationship between the various participating moments – what contribution has been made by advertising, marketing, design, retailing or whatever (Fine, 2002, p. 106).

Wittmann (2007) also provides a number of criticisms on the circuit of culture. His issues begin from du Gay et al.'s (1997) decision to only include five processes instead of four, or six or seven (Wittmann, 2007). He also critiques the authors' decision to include certain cultural processes and leave out others, giving the example of distribution, which, he stated, could also have been featured as part of the circuit (ibid). Moreover,

Wittmann (2007) also criticizes du Gay et al.'s visual representation of the circuit itself. He notes that the logical reasoning for the arrows in the center to be smaller than those around the edges was never explained by the authors (see Figure 3), meaning that this could have certain implications which were never really clarified (ibid). However, the strongest point Wittmann makes is that the circuit of culture is usually only made use of in its entirety when applied at an abstract, theoretical level. When utilized in empirical studies, it is not used in its totality, with researchers selecting only one or two processes (contexts or nodes) for analysis (Wittmann, 2007).

In this research, there is an attempt to address these critiques in the application of the circuit of culture. Initially, through using an ethnography of virtual worlds (see Chapter 5.0 for details), a thorough investigation of all five specific contexts is proposed. This is done to provide a complete, empirical investigation of specific game culture, using all the contexts of the circuit. Furthermore, by relating contextual phenomena and practices to other theoretical concepts outside of the circuit, the outcome of the investigation should ideally be more than the circular journey of a commodity, but rather an interconnected set of meaning-making processes: those which make up a specific game or media culture.

In the following sections of this chapter, we discuss the importance of context and operationalize the circuit of culture for application to F2P games by discussing each context fully.

2.4.   Contexts of Game Culture

Context is immensely important for the study of digital games. After all, games and their players do not exist independent of other social considerations, and have to be viewed from certain perspectives to be analyzed effectively, as stated aptly by King and Krzywinska:

> Gameplay does not exist in a vacuum, any more then games do as a whole. It is situated instead within a matrix of potential meaning-creating frameworks. These can operate both at a local level, in the specific associations generated by a particular episode of gameplay and in the context off broader social, cultural and ideological resonances, (King and Krzywinska, 2006, p.38).
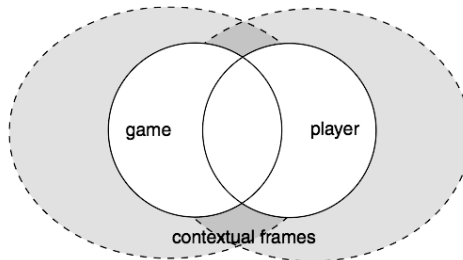

Figure 4: Game studies focusing on the game, its player and arising contexts (reprinted from Mäyrä, 2008, p. 2)

Mäyrä (2008) finds that game studies should focus on the interaction between gamer and game, and especially the contexts arising from this process. The importance of context for Mäyrä (2007) is an attempt to explain various other socio-cultural forces of meaning-making in the digital gaming experience. He bases his original concept of the 'contextual game experience' on the first version of the circuit of culture by Johnson (1980). Adding to the importance of contexts, Wimmer, Mitgutsch, Huber, Wagner & Rosenstingl (2013) find that digital games contextualize the way we play and vice versa, with ways of play re-contextualizing the goals and rules of a game, or even our culture, society and history.

The contexts used in this study are the operationalized processes of the circuit of culture. Hence, it is important to note that while these contexts exist separately and represent completely independent practices within games and their cultures, they do not exist as part of a linear process, but are instead strongly intertwined, continuously influencing each other. This is emphasized during Wimmer's (2012) analysis of the World Cyber Games (WCG) 2008 in Cologne. Attempting to fully analyze the event, Wimmer approaches the case through several contexts, and their impact on one another. To ob-

serve how the WCG was conducted, he applies the context of production. He then shifts his focus to the context of representation when analyzing how the event (and the connected game cultures) were characterized in media and public discourse. Finally, he moves to the context of appropriation in studying how the WCG participants embraced the event.

The influence contexts have on each other can be observed in Wimmer's (2012) case, through several occurrences. For example: the staging of the event by the organizers changes its representation in media, and vice versa. When public relations professionals emphasize sportsmanship and the specialized nature of the event, the concept of the event communicated in public discourse is one of professional sportsmanship. Furthermore, both these contexts have an impact on how participants appropriate, or embrace, the event. Due to the way in which contexts can impose changes on each other, such as that resulting from the connection between (re)presentation and appropriation, Wimmer (2012) finds that digital games are the ideal communicational indicator and supporter of metaprocesses such as commercialization, globalization and mediatization.

Table 2: Manifestations of contextual phenomena and practices on the micro/meso/macro level (adapted from Elmezeny and Wimmer, 2018, p. 85)

	Production	Regulation	Identification	Appropriation	Representation
Micro	User-generated content	Individual/Self-regulation	Personal identity	Individual habits or rituals	In specific games or game-related publications
Meso	Cooperative Development	Subculture rules	Community or clan identity	Community habits or rituals	In specific communities or channels
Macro	Industry Production	Industry standards	Overall cultural identity	Cultural features	In mass media and public discourse

Similar to game cultures, contextual practices can also manifest on the micro, meso or macro levels (see Table 2). Within each context, certain practices can deal with individuals, communities/collectives, or the overall industry and culture. In certain contexts, the micro, meso and macro levels might each be applied in a way that is similar to other social sciences, whereby the micro level deals with individuals, the meso with groups or collections of individuals, and the macro with community/society as a whole (Quandt & Scheufele, 2011). However, certain contexts, such as representation, deal with aspects that do not necessarily concern the individual, and within this context, the micro/meso/macro levels take on different abstractions, as is customary in media and communication sciences (ibid). The examples provided in Table 2 only showcase a typology of possible manifestations within these levels, meaning that they could appear as completely different practices were they in a different overall setting. For example,

the context of representation could address how an individual discusses a certain game on the micro level, as well as how this game is discussed in the games industry on the meso level, and in overall public discourse on the macro level.

The following sections discuss each context in detail, noting previous research that deals with these processes and how they relate to each other.

2.4.1. (re)production

The context of (re)production deals with the structures, means and methods of creating games and play. This context is not limited to the gaming industry or game production and development, but also deals with user-generated content, ranging from fan-art and fanfiction, to fan-modified or developed games. When discussing unethical game design, Zagal, Björk and Lewis (2013) build on arguments made by Juul (2012) and note that certain elements in game design can become unethical when they do not match the particular play style of individuals. This connection showcases the importance of the (re)production context on the context of appropriation, or how the game is utilized and embedded in daily life. It also shows that different methods of use can alter the perceived approach to game production. Such relationships are a great example of the importance of this context on others; not only can the production of games influence the way we appropriate them, but it can also have an impact on how individuals identify with them, how they are represented in public discourse, and, of course, how they are regulated. It is important to note, however, that this relationship is not one-directional and that other contexts can also influence the (re)production of games.

Most research within the context of (re)production deals with the publishing and development of games. For years, scholars and professionals have been discussing and dissecting the process of game design (Costikyan, 1994). Attempting to systemize the process of game production, Church (1999) argued for a set of formal theoretical design tools, while Hunicke, LeBlanc and Zubeck (2004) presented a framework for understanding games, bridging the gap between game design, development, game criticism and technical research of games. Continuing in the same vein and based on an analysis of several unique games, Zagal, Mateas, Fernandez-Vara, Hochhalter & Lichti (2005) created a system encompassing a hierarchy of concepts used for the description, study and analysis of games. Motivated by his previous work in architectural design, Kreimeier (2002) suggested the use of game design patterns as a method for formalizing knowledge about game design. Björk and Holopainen (2005) expanded this concept by developing a sizable collection of almost 300 gameplay patterns. These game design patterns have been applied to several niche areas, such as the design of non-player characters (Lankoski, 2011) and level design (Hullett & Whitehead, 2010; Milam & El-Nasr, 2010). Furthermore, Björk (2010) proposes the use of certain game patterns in the making of good games. He ranks these patterns based on their support for specif-

ic player virtues, such as a sense of achievement, explorative curiosity, social nature, balanced aggression, care for game balance and sportsmanship. He ultimately finds this system advantageous because a "good game is one that encourages people to be good players," (Björk, 2010, p. 3). So, what does this say about F2P games?

2.4.1.1.   Dark Patterns in Game Design

Why is the study of game design patterns so important? Flanagan, Belman, Nissenbaum and Diamond (2007) argue that through the process of design, values and beliefs are ingrained in games. Zagal et al. (2013) find that if games can influence values and ideas in such a way, then it only makes sense that game design patterns as "abstractions of common design elements in games – can also convey and represent values," (p. 2). Based on this argument, Zagal et al. (2013) coin the term "dark game design patterns," or game design patterns "that a designer should not use simply because it [is] wrong," (p. 2). These dark design patterns are quite commonly used in free-to-play games and can be deemed unethical because they encourage destructive play styles or player values. After various theoretical considerations, Zagal et al. provide this formal definition:

> A dark game design pattern is a pattern used intentionally by a game creator to cause negative experiences for players which are against their best interests and likely to happen without their consent (Zagal et al. 2013, p. 7).

Zagal and his colleagues (2013) divide these patterns into three main categories: temporal, monetary and social-capital dark patterns. Temporal patterns have to do with the use of time, and unethical implementation: "the player is being 'cheated' out of their time," (ibid, p. 3). Temporal patterns include grinding or performing repetitive and mind-numbing duties in order to progress in the game, and playing by appointment, where games require the person to play at specific times, determined by the game instead of the player. There are several examples of this, such as F2P farming games (Farmville, Township) that specify a time for crops to be harvested, and while this pattern is not necessarily negative, the added mechanic of crops losing their value if not collected at the right time adds a certain pressure. The end result is that players have to "orient their real- world activities to meet the obligations of the game, rather than the other way around," (Zagal et al., 2013, p. 4).

Monetary dark patterns are ones based on spending money, and are quite common in F2P games. They are all examples of "players being deceived into spending more money than they expected or anticipated," (ibid, p. 4). These dark patterns include: pay-to-skip, pre-delivered content and monetized rivalries. Pay-to-skip is quite a common feature in several F2P games. This pattern entails allowing the player to pay more money in order to progress in the game more easily or at a faster rate. While not outwardly

negative, this feature allows players to pay and pass a level in which they are stuck. However, "a particularly aggressive version of this pattern occurs when the player's ability to play effectively is steadily reduced until payment is required to progress in any meaningful manner," (ibid, p. 4). Zagal et al. (2013) note that this pattern often appears along with grinding, allowing players to skip that process by paying. Pre-delivered content is the pattern whereby the content or functionality for the game exists in the main source-code on the disc or cartridge, but is unavailable until the player pays an additional fee (ibid). The final pattern in this category is monetized rivalries, which exploit the competitiveness between players, encouraging them to spend money they might not want to spend just to achieve in-game status, such as placement on the leaderboards. Among gamers, and in general game culture, this pattern is colloquially known as "pay to win" (ibid. p. 5). This is one of the most dangerous dark patterns because "in order to remain competitive, it is necessary to pay constantly," (ibid. p. 5). This is especially true since several F2P games reward players with in-game bonuses for reaching the top ranks. Additionally, this pattern negates any sort of level-playing field, when players are able to purchase enhancements that provide a competitive edge over their opponents.

Social capital dark patterns are ones that require players to risk their social capital or the value of their social status and relationships. These patterns include social pyramid schemes and impersonations. Social pyramid schemes are dark patterns that are founded on illegal pyramid scheme business models. They usually manifest in games when they "encourage players to invite their friends to participate," (ibid. p. 5) granting the players rewards that are sometimes required for game progression. Zagal et al. (2013) note that the darkness of this pattern comes from "the entrapment that other players experience – they feel socially obliged to play, and must start to invite more people to join the game…trapped in the pyramid they must continue to make it grow," (p. 5). Finally, impersonation is when social network games allow their players to see digital representations of their friends in their own game. The problem with this pattern arises when "the game impersonates other players by communicating actions they never performed, thus misleading the player about the activities of their friends in the game," (Zagal et al., 2013, p. 6). The negative consequence of this pattern is its ability to warp the real-life social relationships of those playing the game.

Zagal et al. (2013) also note some gray areas where digital dark patterns might appear, primarily in the realms of encouraging anti-social behavior and using psychological tricks. Anti-social behavior usually manifests in games whose mechanics encourage players to take some form of unethical action against each other, such as lying, scheming and betrayal. This is seen as a gray area, because committing such actions in– game does not "seem enough to encourage external negative effects," (ibid, p. 6). Psychological tricks, on the other hand, indicate shenanigans designed by game creators to

ensure players spend more time and money, such as the artificial scarcity of virtual objects or in-game currency offers (Madigan, 2012).

Hamari and Lehdonvirta (2010) also provide an overview of design patterns which contribute to the purchase of virtual items. Taking a marketing perspective, they do not attempt to label these patterns as positive or negative; they merely present them in marketing terms. One group of patterns they found was exclusively related to segmentation and differentiation mechanics, such as stratified content, status restricted items, multi-dimensional gameplay and avatar types. Hamardi and Lehdonvirta (2010) find that these design patterns aim to create or enforce division, which generates incentive for repeated purchases. They also note other design patterns such as item degradation, inventory mechanics and artificial scarcity, which would fall under Zagal et al.'s (2013) psychological tricks category, also aimed at incentivizing virtual goods purchase.

2.4.1.2.   Commodification in Free-to-Play and Other Monetization Strategies

Most free-to-play games have received negative attention because of their implementation of the aforementioned dark patterns. Academics studying various free-to-play games have noted these dark patterns and their influence on the commodification of both games and their cultures. One such study was conducted by Evans, looking at three different free-to-play games and their use of branding and gameplay design to monetize impatience. Evans finds that,

> Whilst initially available for free, two key economic strategies emerge in these games that twin gameplay and game design with commercial sensibilities. The first is based around the exploitation or development of brands; the second is concerned with a subsection of the attention economy … in the form of monetizing player impatience, (Evans, 2015, p. 565).

Hence, she notes that free-to-play games serve as an excellent medium for examining the link between game design and commercial strategies. This is especially true since "all freemium games employ similar commercial strategies and demonstrate the same relationship between money, time and attention," (ibid, p. 566).

Through her comparative analysis of three games, Evans (2015) finds that there are comparable characteristics between games which promote aggressive spending, including never-ending gaming worlds, short and frequent playing times, sociability and, of course, in-game currency. The never-ending nature of these virtual words presents a problem in spending because, "they have no clear end point and can potentially run, and be played, indefinitely," (Evans, 2015, p. 569). Short frequent play times are characteristic of mobile games, which capitalize on dead time (Hjorth & Richardson, 2011; Moore, 2011) and encourage players to utilize them frequently but for short times, really exploiting individual impatience. Sociability falls in line with the social capital dark pat-

terns mentioned earlier, promoting competitiveness between players (Consalvo, 2011) as well as requiring social contacts to earn in-game rewards or assets. Finally, in-game currency is the most obvious characteristic to influence spending. Conducting an analysis of the free-to-play game Candy Crush and using a political economic framework, Nieborg (2015) notes the various ways in which these games commodify seemingly harmless habits and activities. In addition to in-game purchases and advertising, Nieborg (2015), in a similar way to Evans (2015), stresses the commodification of relationships and the exploitation of player impatience.

As well as indirect forms of monetization, compared to traditional multiplayer games not applying the freemium business model, where players can sell and trade goods with each other, F2P games are essentially monopolies, since "the game developers serve as the only provider of virtual assets so are in a position to set prices and control trade," (Evans, 2015, p. 570). The resulting virtual economy, which simulates some features of a real-world economy (Lehdonvirta, 2009), is completely at the mercy of the developers. Allowing them to not only charge (in real money) what they want for virtual assets, but also to create the need for them through implementing certain mechanics.

2.4.1.3.   Why Studying Free-to-Play Game Production is Important

Today, an increasing amount of game and app development is being driven by data. Nieborg (2015) finds that "more so than product-driven game developers, studios developing free-to- play games seem to have fully internalized a 'lean' approach to business and software development…incorporating data-driven approaches to development and marketing," (pp. 5-6). In their report on F2P games, Paavilainen et al. (2016) echo this notion, stating that while metric-based development is becoming the dominant ideology, it still has a long way to go: "there is still room for improvement in the way metrics are used – and which metrics are utilized," (p. 57). While being data-driven is not necessarily a negative thing, sacrificing ethics for profit arguably is. This, however, does seem to be the case with several F2P games, which raises various moral issues about their development (Paavilainen et al., 2016) and maintenance.

In addition to ethical concerns, F2P games sometimes have severe playability problems. These can be categorized based on how they impact game usability, and could include: navigation, help, visual clarity, UI layout, camera view and feedback (Paavilainen et al., 2016). Playability problems are common in all types of games, free-to-play or not, and minor ones can usually be ignored if the overall experience is pleasurable (Brown & Cairns, 2004). However, in free-to-play social games, these problems are often an intentional part of the design, intended to promote in-app purchasing and viral activity (ibid). Moreover, developers in F2P games have the ability to adjust game mechanics to continuously find new ways of monetizing the gameplay experience (Hamari & Lehdonvrita, 2010). Free-to-play game professionals find that while large

spending in games might not be problematic, developing games to capitalize on peo-ple's addictive tendencies might be (Alha et al., 2014). Game development for free-to-play is more difficult than traditional payment models because developers have to pro-vide the right amount of content without appearing too aggressive in their business models and monetization. Jordan et al. (2016) comment on F2P game development, stating that it is "a dangerous balancing act for the game developer in the middle of meeting business goals, maintaining a healthy gaming community and considering eth-ics while trying to avoid alienating [sic] their own player base," (p. 2).

2.4.2. Regulation

Due to several ethical production issues mentioned, exploring the regulation of free-to-play games is vital. Surveying various literature, Wimmer and Sitnikova (2011) state that the laws and regulations governing the gaming industry typically deal with two compo-nents: firstly, with the publishers' control of the co-creative process (where user modifi-cation is involved) and 'informal' labor contracts (Kücklich, 2005; Nieborg & van der Graaf, 2008), and secondly, with the formal contracts used by professionals within the industry (Deuze, Martin & Allen, 2007). This statement, however, primarily applies to games that employ traditional business models. For free-to-play games, there are sev-eral other stakeholders and participants involved in the regulation of both production and play. Discussing free-to-play games specifically, Nieborg finds that the platforms that provide access to mobile games and apps also have a fundamental role in their regulation:

> Companies such as Google, Apple, Facebook, and Amazon operate as platform holders, who set the platform's technological standards and governance model, and mediate between, on the one hand, 'buyers' (e.g. players), and on the other hand, suppliers (e.g. King) or 'complementors' (Nieborg, 2015, p. 2).

While there are many players involved in the production and publication of F2P games, Kinnunen (2014) finds that, as opposed to online gambling operators, free-to-play game publishers and developers do not want any regulation of their products from the outside. This presents several difficulties, since it allows them to produce content which pro-motes ethically questionable gameplay and spending.

Discussing virtual game worlds in general, Woodford (2013) reviews various methods of regulation, comparing them to practices followed and enforced by online gambling op-erators. Woodford (2013) finds that there are several issues within online worlds that require some form of regulation, including: "ownership and value of property held within online environments, intellectual property, boundaries of acceptable play, and automa-tion (or botting) to optimally collect resources," (ibid, p. 1). He goes on to discuss vari-ous forms of regulation mentioned in academic literature and the gaming industry, pri-

marily industry self-governance, top-down regulation and evolving models of platform (or game-specific) self-governance. However, he states that none of these solutions are satisfactory, as they have been criticized from both sides, either hindering designer freedom or players' ability to bring about changes. Through the case studies that Woodford (2013) presents, he notes the "presence of a regulatory gap between company representatives and the legal system," (p. 2). There is an imperative need for the regulation of online game worlds (Reynolds & de Zwart, 2011), whether free-to-play or not, and Woodford (2013) suggests that games should follow examples set by the online gambling industry to resolve the various regulatory problems they currently face.

2.4.2.1   Methods of Online World Regulation

The first and most obvious method of regulation for games (both F2P and traditional) would be the application of top-down standards and industry regulations. While these methods would be the easiest to implement and standardize, they still present several risks. Woodford (2013) states that introducing these as regulatory norms before a relationship between gamers and platform providers (game developers) has been normalized would hinder the design freedom available to developers (ibid). Should this task also be left up to governments or associated parties not familiar with online worlds, there is a risk that they could be influenced by a moral panic that can sometimes surround the gaming industry, actually resulting in faulty regulatory decisions and standards. It is therefore of the utmost importance that any regulating parties have sufficient knowledge of the industry and the gaming culture or environment (ibid).

Those who call for top-down regulation often suggest that it be judicial (through the formation of new laws to deal with disputes in game worlds) or quasi-judicial, by creating an organization to act like an ombudsman for the industry, such as the FCC in the US or OFCOM in the UK (ibid). While these methods could be advantageous, they would only be appropriate for implementation in any one country at a time, which would present a problem, given the global nature of most online game worlds. Woodford (2013) instead suggests engaging a quasi-judicial authority which would operate in one country but accept complaints from all over the world, citing an example from the gambling industry: The Independent Betting Adjudication Service (IBAS).

The other solution to regulatory hurdles would be industry or game-specific self-governance. An analysis of these self-governance methods is beneficial as it can lead to better rules being implemented in future games (ibid). According to Woodford (2013), this type of regulation is the best suited for online game worlds, following the example of the gambling industry. He finds that it is the best approach to avoid 'developer fiat', or a situation where the game developers' word is final, overriding any rights that the player might have: "Designers often contend that rather than any outside service, participants should utilize existing channels (game-masters, customer service departments) and that

the designers' decision should be final," (ibid, p. 5). The types of self-governance noted by Woodford (2013) are varied, and range from tools which oversee the entire gaming industry (eCommerce and Online Gaming Regulation and Assurance, for example) to specific environments, such as an Online Dispute Arbitration Board. He notes one successful case that took place within the EVE Online community: the establishment of its Council of Stellar Management. The council, which is made up of devoted players, holds regular online meetings about the game, in addition to being invited multiple times a year to the company headquarters in Reykjavik, Iceland, at the expense of the developer (ibid). As well as resolving disputes, this council offers its opinions on the future development of the game and the platform. The problem with this sort of regulation, Woodford (2013) notes, is that "this approach may be insufficient to resolve high-stake disputes that arise between platforms and participants, and the options available to participants should they be unhappy with the result of these existing processes are extremely limited," (p. 5).

The final suggested method for online regulation, which Woodford (2013) borrows from the gambling industry, is the implementation of an objective third party to oversee and manage disputes. Woodford states:

> The successful form of mediation — Sportsbook Review — emerged as a purportedly neutral third party; one that eventually was recommended to players by the hosts of the forums discussed above, and became the de-facto ranking of Sportsbooks, with information shared across the community forums. Essentially, Sportsbook Review became an arbitrator of disputes as a result of Sportsbooks fear of negative information being distributed across the community; they governed by the power of coercion (Woodford, 2013, p. 6).

As he suggests, this form of regulation is the one best suited to online games, since they share several similarities with the offshore gambling industry. Firstly, most companies often have carte blanche to work as they please (ibid). Secondly, there is an observable gap between customer service departments and judicial courts, which could hinder the rights of players. This can be observed in the terms of service of most online environments (gambling and games), which state that, should a person be unhappy with the services they receive, they have to take action within a specific jurisdiction (where the company is based). Furthermore, in a similar way to gaming, the gambling industry has also settled disputes which aim to "differentiate between advantage play (optimizing play within the rules) and cheating (breaching the rules)," (ibid, p. 8). Due to these similarities, the successful method of regulating offshore online gambling can provide a possible solution to the regulation of online virtual worlds, and especially F2P ones, where real-currency exchange is routine.

2.4.2.2.   The Role of Communication in Regulation

Regardless of the method of regulation enforced, communication always plays a significant role in the process. In all forms of self-governance, whether employed by the developer, a third party, or the players themselves, mediation is key. This is particularly observable through the part that community managers play in the process. When used correctly, community managers can "provide a form of informal dispute resolution between the players and those with the power to impact on the design," (Woodford, 2013, p. 5). Moreover, community managers can assist in providing some form of "compensation or resolution" (ibid, p. 5) to player issues. In certain game companies, this role is also extended to the customer service department, to a degree. While they might not be able to have direct contact with developers, customer service professionals are also in the same "unique position of hearing these problems from players," (ibid, p. 5). Depending on the company environment and game, customer service representatives can also provide compensation to players as they see fit. With these two key game professionals, we can observe the importance of direct channels of communication concerning in-game regulation and conflict resolution.

Another example of the power of communication in helping or hindering regulation comes from Woodfords (2013), who cites a case observed in the offshore gambling industry. He finds that the conciliation that occurs in this industry is often based on the efforts of certain mediators (ibid). Woodford states that these mediators "operate through the power of public perception," (ibid, p. 2) which allows them to be seen as unbiased and reasonable by the players, while still having enough "coercive power" to bring harm to the companies through "publicizing wrongdoing," (ibid., p. 2). Here it is worth observing that not only do ordinary individuals have the ability to influence the regulation process through communication, but also that there are entities that can settle disputes or stir up problems purely through the medium of public communication. These instances stress the overlap of the regulation context with others, especially representation.

2.4.3. Appropriation

When examining the context of videogame media appropriation, the main task is to consider how this medium becomes embedded in daily life. Wimmer (2012) gives the example of game-specific rules and rituals, such as the formation of clans. However, in addition to these rules and rituals, this context also impacts how people utilize videogames on a daily basis, looking at other habits formed, and the values given to (and shaped by) this activity. De Certeau (1984), discussing media audiences, notes that "all audiences are active and creative, in that it is they who bring cultural objects alive in their imagination and give these specific individual meanings, by locating them in everyday lives," (as cited in Crawford & Rutter, 2006, p. 161). Now that games have become

extremely popular, the ways in which people play and utilize them has become excep-
tionally varied (Hamari et al., 2015). Still, regardless of their varied use, digital games
mostly provide serious commitments to and involvement in game environments, some-
thing which Wimmer and Nickol (2013) find helps to create "a stronger bond than other
forms of media consumption" (p. 237). Furthermore, the playing of digital games goes
further than a human-computer interaction; within certain games, the act of play can be
seen "as social communication media in everyday life," (ibid, p. 238) where people have
the chance to interact and mingle with likeminded individuals. Certain online games
have various communicational features, such as mailboxes and chatrooms, which con-
tributes to these games adopting "a social function in the users' everyday lives," (ibid. p.
243). Additionally, observing the context of appropriation is valuable in seeing the spillo-
ver effect between the real and virtual worlds, which denotes "a shift of virtual communi-
ties into the real-world environment, in the form of group meetings," (ibid, p. 239).
Wimmer and Nickol (2013) find that this shift could possibly also happen in reverse, with
the real world influencing the game world, because "people have a tendency of replicat-
ing things online that previously aroused their interest in the real world," (p. 239).

2.4.3.1.   Living Everyday with Games

Attempting to understand the appropriation of Hattrick (a sports management browser
game) and the meaning it provides to its players in everyday life, Wimmer and Nickol
(2013) conduct in-depth interviews with several participants, focusing particularly on
various phenomena tied to the appropriation context. The following categories, which
were used for their interviews, span a number of practices fitting within this context; a
number of them have been adopted in this research as sub-categories to be coded un-
der the appropriation context (see Table 3).

Furthermore, Wimmer and Nickol (2013) found various other appropriation practices
likely to appear in the game selected for this research, which happens to be browser-
based like Hattrick (Hattrick Limited, 1997). These include practices like "account-
sitting," (ibid, p. 244), where gamers let their fellows handle their gameplay when they
cannot. Being constantly online, or even mentally and emotionally logging on, are all
situations one might expect to encounter in the browser game. Finally, Wimmer and
Nickol (2013) noted that the game infiltrates various life-spheres (home, workplace, va-
cation, etc.), and is constantly on the minds of its players. Adjustment strategies are
therefore quite common, and this is presumably the case for the game observed in this
ethnography, as well as other F2P games.

Table 3: Appropriation context categories (adapted from Wimmer and Nickol, 2013, p. 241).

Codes	Definition	Example Practices/Phenomena to Be Coded
Social Relationships	Describes the integrative role of the game in social relationships	• Play as Social Interaction • Social Rules • Game as social tool with others
Integration into Daily Life	Records how and in which way the game is used: who logs into the game, when and where? In this context, areas of everyday life outside of the reach of the game are considered taboo zones	• Play as a non-stressful hobby • Multitasking play
Thoughts and Emotions	Describes the game's presence in everyday life in the form of game-related thoughts and emotions	• Play as pressure • Stress regarding payment
Commitments and Obligations	Comprises additional activities within or outside the game world that have no relation to mere game play and are justified by commitment or an obligation	• Budgeting of time • Budgeting of real money
Self-Assessment	Deals with the participant's self-assessment regarding their gaming behavior	• Financial investment in game • Time investment in game
Spill-In (relates to identity context as well)	Describes how strongly the individual traits of participants influence their gaming behavior	• Motivations for play • Real world actions transferring into game (e.g. bullying)
Real Investments	Observe if the investment of real resources can reflect the meaning of the game in the user's everyday life (e.g. time, work, money)	• Spending and play experience • Spending as play • Value derived from play
Turning Points	Deals with situations in which either the participant's living environment or the gaming environment changed and in turn induced changes in their gaming behavior.	• Open coding

2.4.3.2.   *Social Play is Best Play?*

Given the number of tools and the amount of time spent communicating in digital games, it is no surprise that socializing is an essential part of (if not at the absolute core of) gameplay. The clearest example of social play in multiplayer games occurs when individuals form groups or clans to accomplish their goals. Ducheneaut et al. (2007) find that most online player games require that players band together in a collaborative effort to accomplish their goals. These enduring formal groupings are described as guilds, and they are "essential elements in the social life of online gaming communities," (ibid, p. 1). According to Ducheneaut et al. (2007), guilds have the ability to frame the gamer's experience by "providing a stable social backdrop to many game activities, and their members tend to group with others more often and play longer than non-affiliated players," (p. 1). The social dynamics of almost every guild are unique in some way, and they come in various shapes and sizes: "Some are small groups with pre-existing ties in the physical world and no interest in complex collaborative activities. Others are very large, made up mostly of strangers governed by a command-and-control structure reminiscent of the military," (ibid, p. 1). Unfortunately, Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell & Moore (2006) also find that guilds are unstable social groups, and many do not last long.

Still, regardless of their formation, guilds are proof that socialization is a key process in online gameplay. Even when not accomplishing specific goals, gameplay in a world full of other individuals is more enticing than an empty one full of non-player characters. This phenomenon is known as a sense of social presence (Ducheneaut et al., 2006). The researchers expand on this phenomenon when they discuss public chat channels in World of Warcraft (WoW), where players are able to jump into the conversation whenever they see fit, and not only when playing with a certain group: "Playing WoW can be like reading a book in a densely populated café — while one may not necessarily choose to interact with the other patrons, the sense of being in a public social space is attractive enough for people to conduct individual activities there," (ibid, p. 8). This is something typical of traditional (and virtual) third places (Oldenburg, 1999). Social play and guilds are such an essential part of online worlds that the obligations that come with them can contribute to gameplay addiction (Ducheneaut et al., 2006). Moreover, the longevity of guilds can be detrimental to the longevity of the game and the online world itself (ibid).

Steinkühler and Williams (2006) also stress the social and participatory importance of games by applying Oldenburg's (1999) third places typology to Massive Multiplayer Online Games (MMOs). Third places, or spaces where individuals can informally gather and socialize outside of work and home, have specific characteristics (see Table 4). In their analysis, they compare the properties of MMOs to these characteristics and find

that MMOs, or games providing similar experiences, can be considered third places, where individuals are able to build their social capital (Steinkühler & Williams, 2006).

Table 4: Oldenburg's eight characteristic of 'third places.' Reprinted from Steinkühler and Williams (2006, pp. 890-891)

Characteristic	Definition
Neutral Ground	Third places are neutral grounds where individuals are free to come and go as they please, with little obligation or entanglements with other participants.
Leveler	Third places are spaces in which an individual's rank and status in the workplace or society at large are of no import. Acceptance and participation [are] not contingent on any prerequisites, requirements, roles, duties, or proof of membership.
Conversation is Main Activity	In third places, conversation is a main focus of activity, in which playfulness and wit are collectively valued.
Accessibility and Accommodation	Third places must be easy to access and are accommodating to those who frequent them.
The Regulars	Third places include a cadre of regulars who attract newcomers and give the space its characteristic mood.
A Low Profile	Third places are characteristically homely and without pretension.
The Mood is Playful	The general mood in third places is playful and marked by frivolity, verbal word play, and wit.
A Home Away from Home	Third places are home-like in terms of Seamon's (1979) five defining traits: rootedness, feelings of possession, spiritual regeneration, feelings of being at ease, and warmth.

Social capital is a common concept that repeatedly appears in the study of games. Simply put, social capital can be described as "a function of resources embedded in ties to others…which can be leveraged for individual benefit or collective good," (Molyneux, Vasudevan & Zúñiga, 2015, p. 382). Putnam (2000) expands on the concept by introducing the notions of bridging and bonding social capital. Bridging social capital is considered inclusive, and functions like a social lubricant, such as when individuals with varied backgrounds make connections on social networks. This type of social capital provides little emotional support, but exposes people to different views and perspectives, widening their horizons (Steinkühler & Williams, 2006). Bonding social capital, on the other hand, is more exclusive and occurs when closely bound individuals (family, close friends) provide a network of emotional support, "functioning not as lubricant, but

more of a kind of social superglue," (ibid. p. 901). In their analysis, Steinkühler and Williams (2006) find that social capital built in these virtual worlds functions more as a bridging tool than a bonding one, although some bonding relationships do occur (ibid). In their study of how multiplayer gaming influences offline social and civic behavior, Molyneux et al. (2015) introduce the concept of gaming social capital, or the sense of belonging to a game community and participating in it. Their research highlights the prosocial benefits of participating in traditional, pay-to-play game communities and cultures, finding that gaming social capital can have a spillover effect, which develops into broader offline social capital (ibid).

Looking at more casual social games, Chen and his colleagues (2016) indicate various social factors important in the perceived enjoyment of a game. They conducted a quantitative analysis using data from 169 social game players and found that "Social identification, social interaction, and diversion significantly influence perceived enjoyment," and that "perceived enjoyment significantly influences the intention to play, which in turn significantly influences the actual behavior," (Chen et al., 2016, p. 99). They find that social interaction is both a social and gaming factor, making this interaction one of the most important factors in an optimal digital gaming experience (ibid). Another interesting insight they provide is that the number of users within a virtual game world can help or hinder the success of the game, with games that have more users being more appealing to new players: "The more users in a social game, the more user-generated experiences it is likely to attract, and thus the more users will play it," (ibid, p. 113). They dub this phenomenon critical mass, and it refers to both the role of intention to play and gameplay behavior (ibid). This critical mass highlights the decision taken by developers to use the F2P model, hoping that free access will populate their online virtual worlds, attracting more players.

2.4.3.3.   Consumption in Play

In several games today, virtual assets are quite common. Guo and Barnes define virtual assets as:

> intangible valuables that exist solely in the computer systems known as virtual worlds—elements that may have a significant role in improving the overall competence or appearance of the characters owned by a player, such as items (e.g., weapons or clothing), or virtual currencies, (Guo & Barnes, 2007, p. 69).

Players are able to buy these items within the game, either to assist them in gameplay, or to serve a decorative function. In games with traditional payment models, these items are usually sold as additional or DLC content for real money, having only a minor impact on gameplay. Within most F2P games, however, virtual assets are essential to the gameplay experience and their impact can be transformative. According to Paavilainen

et al. (2016), certain factors are positively associated with the purchase of virtual goods, including gender, employment, play frequency and time. They also find that the more platforms an individual uses, the more likely he or she is to spend on virtual goods. However, factors such as age, education and family size played no role in purchasing behavior (ibid). A study conducted by YouGov. (2018) of German F2P players also highlighted some interesting purchasing patterns that contrast with Paavilainen et al. (2016). For example, younger players are more likely to spend than older ones, men more than women, and naturally, those with higher incomes were more likely to spend money on in-game benefits ("YouGov: Pay-to-win ist eine Frage von Einkommen und politischer Haltung", 2018). However, surprisingly, political affiliation and the location of players also seemed to influence purchasing patterns. Only 8% of West Germans had purchased benefits several times, while 17% of East Germans did. As for political affiliations, it seemed that AFD supporters were the most likely to spend (16%), followed by Green party supporters (15%), Left supporters (13%) and finally the FDP with 11% (ibid).

As mentioned earlier, within most F2P games there are two types of distinct virtual objects: decorative and functional. Functional virtual objects have a significant use value and can assist the player by providing either essential resources or tools. Decorative items, on the other hand, have no use value, but instead offer symbolic value for their players (Lehdonvirta, 2009). Virtual items sometimes have ties to real-world culture (Lehdonvirta, 2009), mimicking holidays and other festivities. Expanding on these two functions, in an attempt to discern what value virtual objects can provide, Lehdonvirta (2009), building on Oh and Ryu (2007), suggests a three-pronged approach. He states that these digital goods have three possible attributes: functional, social or hedonic (Lehdonvirta, 2009). Functional attributes are pretty self-explanatory: the items that have these attributes provide advantages and new functionalities that, "no doubt have a strong influence on users' purchase decisions," (ibid, p. 106). Hedonic attributes, on the other hand, signify virtual goods that provide primarily aesthetic satisfaction within the game: "If the aesthetic aspects of virtual goods are sufficiently compelling, users may derive hedonistic pleasure from experiencing them," (ibid, p. 106). Finally, social attributes denote when a virtual object provides social value, as something coveted within the community or a status marker (ibid). Lehdonvirta (2009) states that designers usually increase the social value of items by manufacturing "rarity," making certain items collectible and only available for a limited time (p. 108).

With the purchase of digital objects becoming quite common, some academics (Paavilanien et al., 2016) have found that gamers considered "virtual goods as vices, monitored purchasing behavior to avoid addiction, and disliked that virtual goods provide unfair advantages," (Jordan et al., 2016, p. 3). Other players feel that the use of virtual objects is outright cheating (Bartle, 2004; Burke, 2002; Taylor, 2002) because

buying functional items gives an unbalanced competitive advantage. In doing so, the purchase of certain items can be seen as disrupting the achievement hierarchy within online multiplayer games (Bartle, 2004; Burke, 2002). The greatest criticism to virtual consumption in game worlds, however, is the assumption that it can break the magic circle, where "real-life economic structures and hierarchies may leak into the virtual world, making it impossible for players to enjoy a truly parallel life online," (Lehdonvirta, 2005, p. 2).

In order to discover what influences the decision to purchase virtual assets, Guo and Barnes (2007) propose a research framework based on previous models that attempts to explain online purchasing behavior. They collect factors from models such as the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991), the theory of reasoned action (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975), trust theory (McKnight, Cummings & Chervany, 2002), and the unified theory of acceptance and use of technology (Venkatesh, Morris, Davis & Davis, 2003), to provide a psychometric approach to purchasing behavior. Their proposed framework provides a starting point where analytical research into the purchasing decisions of virtual assets can begin. They propose notions such as previous spending or trust being indicative of future spending (Guo & Barnes, 2007). However, Lehdonvirta (2009) finds their approach provides "a rather mechanistic view of user motivations, which furthermore makes assumptions regarding the mechanics of the underlying service," (p. 101) restricting its application to only certain games.

Taking the game Habbo Hotel as an example, Lehdonvirta et al. (2009) argue that the consumption of virtual goods in games follows the same line of logic as material consumption. They find that, similar to material goods, which provide satisfaction based on their ability to become class and status markers, virtual goods consumption reveals "Self-expression, aesthetic considerations and even artistic aspirations," (ibid, p. 1073). Lehdonvirta et al. (2009) additionally note that virtual goods consumption in games functions as a status marker by differentiating between "high status and low status, between membership and non-membership, and between one group and another," (ibid., p. 1073). Going back to the communicative importance of games, Wimmer and Nickol (2013) find that social function "seems to be a general incentive for games that provides profit to the producers," (p. 243). They note that, in Hattrick specifically, individuals were willing to spend more money for additional social functions instead of actual game content (ibid).

2.4.3.4. Appropriating Free-to-Play

As is the case with traditional games, F2P games are appropriated into daily lives in a variety of ways. This is in line with de Certeau's (1984) concept of active audiences, in which different appropriation of the same cultural artifacts can provide special meanings for individuals. Paavilainen and his colleagues (2016) have conducted a research pro-

ject dealing primarily with the diverse aspects of free-to-play games, highlighting various unique appropriation practices. One such aspect is that, in addition to playing against the regular mechanics of the game, players of F2P sometimes have an added "meta-challenge" (ibid, p. 28) where they also attempt to play against the monetization mechanics in the game, in the hope of not having to make in-app purchases. Furthermore, interviewing F2P game professionals, Alha et al. (2014) note that some participants have likened the process of playing these games to other hobbies that require financial investment: "Paying for playing might be cheaper than a night at a bar with friends," (p. 7). This is because, compared to traditional games with a one-time payment, F2P games provide a stream of continuous microtransactions, and hence, players might find themselves spending constantly on one game, in a way that is similar to the way individuals pour resources into their real-life hobbies. Lehdonvirta (2009) also echoes this notion, finding that virtual consumption can sometimes serve as a substitute for consumption in the real world: "lack of trendy sneakers at school could be compensated with virtual dragons," (p. 1075).

Through an analysis of the free-to-play game KingsRoad, Jordan et al. (2016) discuss various social and appropriation practices not present in traditional games, such as "boycotting general gameplay and staging strikes with the aim of reverse-engineering what it perceived as unfeasible developments," (p. 2). Moreover, players of their game staged virtual protests, signed petitions and held strikes to ask for compensation measures for development mishaps (ibid). They also note how players escape the oppressive development structure and game community by congregating in 'safe-zones', or separate virtual communities surrounding the game, but out of reach of the developers (such as on Facebook groups or pages). Finally, Jordan et al. (2016) note that players of KingsRoad even support each other, appropriating "cloud- and web-based applications to reverse-engineer parameters of the game," and collaborating to "create micro-knowledge bases, such as wikis and spreadsheets," (p. 3). This practice can also be considered an overlap with the (re)production context.

One last appropriation practice worth noting, which might not be quite unique to free-to-play games, is the idea of time or money as interchangeable resources. This concept is present in many online games with traditional payment systems, which have illegal ways of purchasing in-game currency for real money (Lee & Lin, 2005). Looking at various forms of cheating, Consalvo describes how gamers feel about this process:

> None of the players who I talked with admitted to using real money to buy in-game currency, items, or accounts. That is probably due to the stigma that the practice still carries for many players as well as its violation of most games' terms of service agreements, (Consalvo, 2007, p. 94).

Within free-to-play games, however, the purchase of in-game currency is in a sense institutionalized, and one can purchase whatever amount one pleases with no legal in-game repercussions. While in game culture this is largely seen as "the antithesis of gameplay," (Evans, 2015, p. 574) with some free-to-play gamers even finding that the practice is ruining the playing field (Lin & Sun, 2007), a vast number of F2P gamers have no qualms about undertaking microtransactions (Paavilainen et al., 2016). One possible explanation is that free-to-play mostly caters to a more casual audience, due to its ease of access, the devices on which the games are played, and the connection to social networks (Jordan et al., 2016).

Most casual gamers probably do not have the time or intention of pouring countless hours into leveling their characters, and therefore, do not see a problem in spending money to "acquire items or skill levels as soon as possible — sooner than normal gameplay allows," (Consalvo, 2007, p. 162). The problem with this, however, is that in F2P games, design is sometimes implemented for exceptionally slow gameplay, in an attempt to lure even the most patient of players (Evans, 2015). Still, while audiences are active, have free will, and are able to appropriate F2P games as they see fit, according to Kline, Dyver-Witherford and De Peuter (2003), it is important not to underestimate the commercial structure of the games industry and "the audience's primary role as eco-nomic consumers" (Crawford & Rutter, 2006, p. 154). This cannot be stressed enough for F2P games, with their various instances of mental trickery enacted through moneti-zation techniques.

2.4.3.5.   Blurring Lines Between Real and Game Worlds

With multiple ways of appropriation and behaviors transferred between the virtual and real, the lines between these worlds starts to distort. One example of this the transfer model, a term coined by Fritz (2006). In an attempt to explain videogame usage, Fritz (2006) finds that a transfer process occurs between the cognitively separate virtual and real worlds. This is a process whereby individuals transfer meaningful cognitive schemes from the real world to the virtual one, or vice versa. These processes can take place on different levels, and the cognitive schemes themselves could consist of facts, prints, scripts, metaphors or even power (the latter taking place on socio-dynamic lev-els). Facts are purely informational, prints can encompass certain behaviors, scripts are a series of prints, and metaphors are where individuals might draw comparisons be-tween both worlds (Fritz, 2003). He states that gamers select the games they play with some idea of the transfer process (Fritz & Fehr 1997). This results in gamers generally having a preference for games where they can achieve power, sovereignty and control (Fritz, 2003), which are all forms of socio-dynamic transfer processes. The outcome of this sort of selection is what can be called structural coupling, when the preferences of players are molded by their demand for control (ibid). The transfer model can best be

described as the linking process between reality and virtual reality, which materializes in digital games (Wimmer & Schmidt, 2015).

Moreover, Wimmer and Nickol (2013) note that the "mediatized gaming world" (p. 246) can keep growing and gamers can be encouraged to expend time that has been allocated for other activities, such as hobbies or real-life responsibilities. They also note the opposite to be just as valid, that should a person's other activities require more attention, game activity will surely be influenced (ibid). Discussing guild behavior, Ducheneaut et al. (2006), confirm the influence that the real world has on gaming activity, by finding that most individuals do not have a problem with abandoning their guilds, should the real world be too demanding.

This blurring of lines between the game and real world is less than ideal, as games should provide temporary perfection in an imperfect world, where players can escape real world pressures (Huizinga,1955). This is the primary idea behind the concept of the magic circle, a bounded space of play that is separate from real life (Jordan et al., 2016). Salen and Zimmerman (2004) expand the concept, defining it as the "special place in time and space created by a game." (p. 79). Hence, games have been classically thought of to be able to provide a safe space for players which offers different structures from the real world and allows them to escape their problems.

When we talk about the real world overpowering the imaginative sense of immersion provided by a game, most believe that this is the magic circle being broken (Jordan et al., 2016; Lin & Sun, 2007). However, Consalvo (2009) argues that the magic circle is not a rigid boundary that can be broken, but more of a dedicated space to which individuals bring their real lives, obligations and expectations as well. Jordan et al. (2016) confirm Consalvo's (2009) argument when looking at their F2P game KingsRoad, noting that "the magic circle may not necessarily be broken but perhaps made more elusive by both player and developer agency," (Jordan et al. 2016, p. 14). What this implies is that the magic circle might not necessarily be broken in F2P games, but rather renegotiated. Still, how much of the real world can seep into the magic circle before we consider it destroyed or even non-existent? Could this blurring of boundaries simply be the next state of gaming or existence, noted as hyperreality by Baudrillard (1993), where there is no distinction between the real or unreal (Crawford & Rutter, 2006)?

2.4.4. Identification

Bauman (1997) finds that nowadays identity is heavily based on our hobbies and consumption activities, due to the decrease in permanent career options. So, when we appropriate games into our daily lives, they are sure to have more of an influence than merely providing entertainment. Shaw (2013) states that "the process of identification in

video games is often conflated with the interactivity of video games," (p. 354). Hence, the appropriation and identification contexts of video games are closely intertwined.

The context of identification looks at the ways in which individuals are constantly building their identity through the forms communicated in games. This is in evidence when individuals wear special clothes and use language associated with specific games to show membership within their communities or to differentiate themselves from non-gamers (Wimmer, 2012). The possibilities for identification with videogames are vaster than in other media, due to the interactive qualities of this medium (King and Krzywinska, 2006; Wolf, 2001). Not only do the individuals that play games undergo a process of identity construction and negotiation, but so do professionals working in the gaming industry (Wimmer and Stinikova, 2011). Van Looy et al. (2010) devised a scale to measure player identification in MMORPGS, and their scale looks at the identification of players on three levels: avatar identification, group identification and game identification. High *avatar identification* predicted roleplay as a motivation for play, escapism and empathy, while higher *group identification* predicted socialization and relationships, and finally, *game identification* predicted escapism and mechanics (ibid). However, in this ethnography, we are dealing with more casual games. Hence, we first have to detect how players identify as 'gamers'. Moreover, since this research observes the entire game culture of a specific game, the following section deals with the identities of all members of its culture: those who play the game and those who make it.

2.4.4.1.   Identifying as a Gamer

Understanding the relationship between identity and videogames is no easy task, and as such, defining the identity of gamers is equally difficult. Gee (2003) discusses the complexities of gamer identification through use of the term "tripartite play of identities," (p. 58) which is composed of the player's own identity, the identity of the avatar they play and the relationship between the two, which is conveyed as a projection of the player's own identity onto the digital character.

> It transcends identification with characters in novels or movies, for instance, be-cause it is both active (the player actively does things) and reflexive, in the sense that once the player has made some choices about the virtual character, the virtual character is now developed in a way that sets certain parameters about what the player can do. The virtual character redounds back on the player and affects his or her future actions. (Gee, 2003, p. 58)

Examining the importance of reputation and avatars in MMORPGs, Ducheneaut et al. (2006) find that "an avatar wearing powerful items, for instance, is essential to the con-struction of a player's identity," (p. 7). While Gee's framework is beneficial in under-standing identification in and with games, it is not necessarily active in all games (Shaw,

2013), such as those that don't have visible avatars or characters to identify with. Such is the case with the game examined in this research.

Shaw (2013) argues that, in game studies, more investigations are required to thoroughly assess the processes of identification which games contribute to. Focusing on media practice (Couldry 2000, 2004) instead of media texts, and using Cohen's (2001) identification measures as talking points, Shaw (2013) reveals "the complexities of studying identification in this medium," (p.349). She conducts ethnographic case studies with digital game players who do not self-identify as gamers (ibid). In doing so, she highlights various aspects which contribute to an individual's identification as a gamer, primarily: self-identification, participation in gaming communities, and the continuous use of the medium (ibid). Shaw (2013) finds that media tastes and interests are not indicative of the gamer identity, since one of her participants had tastes that aligned with the hardcore gamer stereotype, including anime and sci-fi television, while the other had completely different interests such as "going to art exhibits and hiking" (p. 352). However, distaste for similar things can help to identify a gamer. Both her participants disliked games with difficult controls and "leveling up in Role-Playing Games…or playing First-Person Shooters" (ibid, p. 352), which indicated both as non-gamers. Still, Shaw (2013), who builds on arguments by Juul (2012) and Consalvo (2009), finds these aspects more characteristic of hardcore gamers, meaning that those who do not fit the bill could still be considered casual gamers: "the casual/hardcore divide encompasses both kinds of games played, as well as individual investment in playing, neither of which are necessarily constant," (p. 352).

Overall, Shaw's (2013) ethnographic study highlights several interesting aspects of identification within digital games. She noted that one participant sometimes felt like a "junkie" (ibid, p. 353) looking for her next fix. More importantly, she notes that the reasons people have for playing digital games can impact their experience, which in turn influences their identification with the characters in the game (ibid). Shaw (2013) expands on this by noting that both her participants did not play games socially; hence, gameplay for them "fulfilled very particular, personal needs and desires," (ibid, p. 353). Moreover, her observations on solitary play also suggest that the type of games utilized, as well as individual approaches to media, could influence the player's identification with characters (ibid).

Both of the exercised gamer labels of hardcore or casual can be considered a form of social identity. Each term can be defined as a "part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership," (Tajfel, 1981, p. 255). Individuals usually identify with certain groups through the processes of social comparison, social identification and social categorization (Spears, 2011). Social cate-

gorization deals with how individuals classify issues in their social environments, as well as the establishment of characteristics that dictate who can be members of certain groups. This is followed by social identification, which entails an individual fitting into a certain group. Finally, these two processes are governed by social comparison, where "by comparing the in-group with the out-group, the self and its associated social groups gain meaning and value," (De Grove, Courtois, & Van Looy, 2015, p. 348). This means that for individuals to identify as gamers, whether casual or hardcore, they undergo certain processes of comparing their activities and behaviors to similar individuals, differentiating between groups and then identifying with a certain crowd, achieving value from this bonding. Proposed by De Grove et al. (2015) this theoretical approach to identification is a combination of social identity and self-categorization theory, which could possibly explain certain stereotypes and preferences of hardcore or casual gamers.

2.4.4.2.   Types of Gamers

Whether casual or hardcore, individuals who play games are considered to fit into specific categories (Bartle, 1997). One of the first typologies for player types in virtual worlds was suggested by Bartle (1997), who found that players belong into one of four classifications:

- Achievers: those who like to reach defined goals and achieve high status
- Explorers: individuals interested in discovering the virtual world and its logic
- Socializers: players who enjoy interacting with others
- Killers: those who gain pleasure from dominating others

These typologies have served as guidance for both academics and designers alike (Lehdonvirta, 2005). However, since then, certain academics have suggested more varied and comprehensive models. Looking at player motivations in MMORPGs, Yee (2005) expanded on Bartle (1997) to include several other motivations for play. His model is founded on three core incentives: achievement, social or immersion. Each one of these main components includes sub-motivations (see Table 5), which he identified through a player survey utilizing open-ended questions. The main difference between Yee's model and Bartle's is that in Yee's categorization, these player types are not mutually exclusive, and players might have numerous motivations for gameplay, as long as they are not in opposition to each other.

 Yee's model is one of several devised to assess player motivations and types. Looking at previous research regarding player types, Hamari and Tuunanen (2014) provide a meta-synthesis of this research and argue that gamer types in current literature can be categorized based on five key dimensions: achievement, exploration, sociability, domination and immersion.

Table 5: Player motivation model (adapted from Yee, 2005).

Achievement	Social	Immersion
Advancement: status, progress, power	Socializing: making friends, helping others, general chat	Discovery: lore, exploration, treasure hunting
Mechanics: numbers, analysis, theory crafting	Relationship: giving and finding support, self-disclosure	Role-Playing: fantasy, roles, character backstory, storyline
Competition: aggravation, domination, challenging others	Teamwork: group achievements, collaboration	Customization: skins, color schemes, style, appearances
		Escapism: relaxation, escape from real life and its problems

2.4.4.3. Identities of Game Professionals

Wimmer and Sitnikova (2011) conduct a qualitative inquiry into the identities of game professionals in Germany. They interview nine individuals, employed in various sectors of game development, and through their analysis they attempt to provide a description of the individuals' professional identity. Using frameworks by previous academics (Dueze et al., 2007; Peterson & Arnand, 2004, as cited in Wimmer and Sitnikova, 2011), they argue that the identity of game workers (within the context of the game industry) can be observed in five domains. The first domain is technology, which serves as "the driving force in the industry" (ibid. p. 2). This is followed by law and regulation, then industrial and organizational structure of the industry, in which Wimmer and Sitnikova (2011) note, "games are often produced in temporary projects and in collaboration with other people than just gameworkers," (p. 3). The next domain is occupational careers, which are determined by business structures, and result in the majority of professionals in the game industry being male and the provision of marketing and design aimed at men. The final domain consists of the markets of the game industry, which, they note, have several peculiarities, such as games being omnipresent, and the market being stereotypically predefined (ibid).

Summarizing Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2006), Wimmer and Sitnikova (2011) find these domains that compose the game workplace to be sites of conflict instead of acceptance: "The work is permanently followed by stress, long working hours and crunch time…which results in a high rate of turnover in the industry and a lot of gameworkers who plan to leave the business in the future," (p. 4). However, the game workplace can also be considered a site of conflict between the various identities of an individual. Social identities of individuals indicate a category to which one belongs, such as work groups, political affiliations, or nationality (Hogg and Terry, 2001, as cited in Wimmer and Sitnikova, 2011). Individuals today, and especially gameworkers or other media

professionals, articulate their identities through "appropriation of media content," and so identities today can be called "mediated identities," (Wimmer and Sitnikova, 2011, p. 4.). Regardless of their category, social identities are increasingly media-centric, and this is why Wimmer and Sitnikova utilize this aspect in their definition of professional identity:

> Professional identity is a mostly mediated self-concept of an individual as a member of a certain professional group, followed by a strong sense of coherence with professional life and understanding of and behaving in accordance with professional standards, values and roles (Wimmer and Sitnikova, 2011, p.5).

The conflict of identities assumed to occur in the game workplace is between the individual's professional identity and other social identities (as a gamer or fan). During these occurrences, it is assumed that individuals are likely to experience conflict should their professional values not align with their personal gamer values. This is due to the values of game professionals partially overlapping with the standards of the profession (ibid), which might conflict with whatever values they have as a gamer or fan. Still, there is a cohesiveness between both these identities, and Wimmer and Sitnikova's (2011) research shows that their respondents "perceive themselves as a part of their profession and the team/studio they work with/at," (p. 12) which they believe is because of the professionals' deep interest in computer games. They find this to be the reason most of the respondents do not perceive their work as a vocation and that "they are so strongly interested in making games that this process is enjoyable despite all the difficulties," (ibid, p. 12).

2.4.4.4.   Identification in Casual and Free-to-Play Games

The flurry of casual and free-to-play games is assumed to be changing gamer identity. Juul finds that, with the introduction of the Nintendo Wii, both gameplay and the social identity of 'the gamer' are being reshaped:

> The simplicity of early video games is being rediscovered, while new flexible designs are letting video games fit into the lives of players. Video games are being reinvented, and so is our image of those who play the games (2012, p. 2).

Nevertheless, even while being redefined, there is still some social stigma to playing free-to-play and casual social games (Gruning, 2013). This stigma could stem from casual games, such as Farmville and other social media-integrated games being seen as "challenge free," requiring little more than constant clicking (Bogost, 2010). Alternatively, the stigma could stem from the in-game real money purchases, which are seen as the "antithesis of gameplay" (Evans, 2015, p. 574). In most games, character status reflects player status, and when people are freely able to purchase equipment and assistance, there is nothing special about becoming a champion anymore.

> A high-level character isn't just a high-level character: it's a marker of player status. If it's worn by someone not entitled to wear it, that very seriously annoys those who are entitled to wear it. It says something about a player's achievements: it's non-transferable (Bartle, 2004, n.p).

In addition to being a source of social stigma, these microtransactions are assumed to demotivate a majority of players: "when poor people can't even role-play being rich, they're going to be disheartened," (ibid, n.p). The social stigma could also be considered a product of the social identity of the (hardcore) gamer label, where specific behaviors are expected of individuals, such as the love of challenge and inherent hatred of microtransactions.

Bourdieu's (1990) concept of habitus can provide another perspective on the preference of F2P among those who identify as gamers. Habitus refers to the bodily personification of cultural capital, or the deeply seated habits and characteristics that individuals possess due to their life experiences (Bourdieu, 1990). Habitus can include our taste for cultural objects, such as clothing and art ("Habitus", 2016), or in the case of gamers, the taste for specific games and genres. Bourdieu (1984) argued that an individual's social class is often linked to his or her taste in art, and in the case of gamers, it could then also be assumed that previous experiences with other games and consoles (habitus) could be linked to their social class within a specific society (hardcore/casual or pay/non-pay user), and therefore, their taste preference for F2P games. Furthermore, Bourdieu (1984) states that habitus is so deeply rooted in individuals that they believe that some are more culturally refined than others, leading to justified social discrimination. This explains the animosity amongst gamers and heated debates around microtransactions or F2P games, as well as possible bias and user divisions within F2P communities.

Nevertheless, free-to-play games provide individuals with the chance to express and construct their identities through customization and consumption, which is its material or analog counterpart (Gruning, 2013). Lehdonvirta (2010) finds that "people consume virtual goods for much the same reasons they consume material goods: to establish social status and live up to the expectations of their peer groups, to build and express identity," (p. 886). In doing so, individuals attach symbolic value to digital objects, that would otherwise be worthless (Gruning, 2013). This new era of consumption and identity construction has been dubbed "digital post-materialism," by Lehdonvirta (2010), and he states that beliefs and practices surrounding such digital games "cannot be described as non-material culture, because they involve assigning cultural meanings to tangible features of digital architecture" (pp. 885-86). Therefore, while casual and free-to-play games provide an innovative way of self-expression, their distinct consumer and mate-

rialistic elements can present a new manifestation of overly commercialized culture that should not be ignored.

2.4.5. Representation

The context of representation deals not only with the presentation of certain themes in video games, but also their image in mass media and public discourse. Consalvo (2003) finds that digital games have a history of being depicted negatively in US popular discourse, usually as something problematic or devoid of value. However, she also proposes that "if games become more mainstream, perhaps the discourse will shift too," (Consalvo, 2003, p. 321), which indeed is evident in later research on the image of digital games in mainstream media (McKernan, 2010; Wimmer, 2012). McKernan (2010) analyses the portrayal of digital games in The New York Times, beginning in the 1980s. He notes that several images are attributed to video games, improving with time, as they become a more integral part of popular culture: "This change in coverage may be indicative of the mainstream media's recognition of video games as a permanent presence in children's lives," (McKernan, 2010, p.325). Sørensen (2012), who looks at the portrayal of video games in the German press, finds that the media attributes different or multiple identities to digital games. These identities range from depicting them as political, technical or civil objects, to representing them as sport, by stressing their strategy and teamwork efforts (ibid). With digital games becoming more casual, accessible and a part of mainstream culture, mass media representations of them are improving. However, widespread moral panic regarding the threats of violence and addiction are still common. Nevertheless, there is an improvement in their mainstream representation, with positive portrayals praising the socialization or learning possibilities of games, or sometimes professionalizing them and likening them to regular sports (Wimmer, 2012).

Looking at the World Cyber Games (WCG) in Cologne, Wimmer (2012) analyzes the representation of the event and its participants in mainstream media. Analyzing 1731 TV, print and online reports of the event, he notes that the WCG is described as entertainment for everyone and a sporting event, mentioning that "the professionalization of the event is portrayed by drawing parallels to events of professional sports (national teams, flags, tracksuits, anthems and support staff)" (p. 533). Wimmer (2012) also notes that the inclusion of team sponsors adds to the comparison and to the event's commercialization factor. Looking at the portrayal of digital games themselves, he states that digital games are depicted as "tasks that require sophisticated and sometimes highly complex patterns of action," (ibid, p. 534). Finally, Wimmer (2012) notes that PR managers of the event were focused on reducing stereotypes concerning digital games. This includes distancing the event and the participants from violence and the term 'nerd'.

2.4.5.1.   *Free-to-Play Depictions in Public Discourse*

One of the earliest studies looking at free-to-play games in media and public discourse was conducted by Lin and Sun (2007). They undertake a content analysis using threads from two extremely popular message boards in Taiwan at the time: Gamebase and Bahamut. Their research pinpoints several arguments regarding F2P games, voiced by players and grouped into the following major categories: free market, fairness, fun and game order and quality (ibid). Players making the free market argument noted that game companies needed to make money to survive, and that "all users are given adequate information to understand a game's payment model before entering, thus companies cannot be accused of deceit or coercion," (Lin & Sun, 2007, p. 338). Those who were against the model noted that companies misled players with game-related ads, and that players who wanted to be able to participate fully would end up spending more money than in subscription or traditional payment games: "Imagine a noodle shop claiming that their noodles are free, but the cost of chopsticks exceeds that normally found for a bowl of noodles," (ibid, p. 339).

As for the fairness argument, most players voiced the opinion that players of such games are divided into two categories: those who do not pay and those who do. This results in an unfair environment, with "one game, two experiences," (ibid, p. 339) and poor players always being at a disadvantage. However, proponents of the model find that the aspect of time serves as a foundation of fairness: "whether rich or poor, players have equal amounts of time, and those who spend more time playing and honing their skills can become stronger than those who don't," (ibid, p. 339). This would certainly be fair if games were balanced in such a way that grinding for an acceptable amount of time would lead to the same benefits as purchasing. However, in most aggressively monetized games, this is not the case, with endless grinding barely equating in value to the most minor of microtransactions.

When it comes to the debate around fun, opponents of free-to-play games found that those who do not pay have much less fun, having to "endure long stretches of boring, restricted, and handicapped gaming experiences," (ibid, p. 339). Alternatively, those who pay can still lose some sense of fun in showing off their achievements if they have been bought: "From this viewpoint, the fun of play has been replaced by the fun of shopping," (ibid, p. 339). Again, something indicative of consumer culture (McAllister, 2003). Enthusiasts of F2P games appreciated the payment model because they felt it "give[s] players multiple opportunities and ways to experience games and manage their own sense of fun at minimal cost," (ibid, p. 340).

The final major argument is regarding game order and quality, with the standard position being that structural problems are to blame for the decline of quality and gameplay in F2P games. The lack of balance in gameplay also results in non-paying players hav-

ing a harder time, when "all types of players should have equal opportunity to survive in and enjoy a game world," (ibid, p. 340). Moreover, free entry into the game world causes the quality of the community itself to be lower, with more rule violations, deviant behavior and norm infractions. Supporters, however, claim that "as long as game companies clearly make an effort in terms of self-regulation and finding a balance point that allows poor players to survive, there is no problem," (ibid, p. 340).

Players made some additional arguments regarding F2P games, such as being "money-rich but skill-poor," (ibid, p. 341) which gives more importance to profit than to larger gameplay issues, or supporters who felt that most players that had problems with such games were simply "exposing their lack of self-control, whereas true free game players are those capable of fully reaping the benefits of the free game business model," (ibid, p. 341). Overall, Lin & Sun's (2007) research highlighted contrasting perceptions in public discourse. Moreover, it showcased how the model is shifting gamers' sense of ownership, as well as how the participants of such games have a weaker sense of community, "since their participation is closer to that of consumers," (ibid, p. 342).

Conducting in-depth interviews with free-to-play gamers, Paavilainen et al. (2016) find that the issue of spending in free-to-play games is intensely debated, with some individuals having strong views against it, while others are more than willing to pay to enhance their experience. Moreover, those who spent a lot do not see a problem with their transactions if they feel like they are getting their money's worth.

As mentioned earlier, one might argue that the negative image F2P games have among regular pay-to-play gamers can be attributed to cultural capital and the expected preferences of gamers. Bordieu's (1984) concept of cultural capital provides a "theoretical understanding of the role of taste and consumptions in patterns of social distinction," (Crawford & Rutter, 2006, p. 155). Cultural capital can be utilized by certain social formations to represent their refined tastes. In a similar way to how classical musical enthusiasts shy away from popular music, hardcore and pay-to-play gamers might shun F2P as an indication that they have good taste. However, it is important to realize that "taste is not an innate ability but rather something we are taught and which is used by communities to make value judgments about what is acceptable and desired culture," (ibid, p. 155). Meaning that this disdain for F2P games could be a socially constructed ideology within game culture, and not necessarily indicative of individual opinions or game quality.

On the other hand, the negative overall image of those who pay for benefits in F2P games indicates an obsession with "skill" in game culture and discourse. Paul (2018) discusses this obsession and how it leads to an undesirable meritocracy. Meritocracy, if carried out ideally, is a system "based upon a competition in which the achieved rather than ascribed characteristics of individuals determine the outcome. It is a system which

depends upon genuine equality of opportunity but which generates unequal outcomes," (Saunders, 1995, p. 27). In theory, this system avoids structural inequalities, such as socioeconomic class, race and gender, allowing individuals to prove themselves based on their achievements. While this is true for most pay-to-play games, it is surely not the case for F2P games. However, this might not necessarily be a bad thing. Paul (2018) argues that the meritocracy present in gaming culture is also blind to structural disadvantages, such as race or gender, promoting a toxic culture without innovative game development, and focusing on one specific target group. So, while F2P games might threaten the meritocratic system in gaming culture, it could be for the better, either because it gives those disadvantaged some assistance, or because it might invigorate game development.

Looking at the perception of game developers on the free-to-play game model, Alha et al. (2014) note that they have a better outlook regarding the model than non-developers. They note that most of the opposition comes from hardcore or core gamers, who are experienced in different payment models and games. In addition to poorly designed and aggressively monetized games, most hardcore gamers fear that regular games "will suffer or disappear because of the ever-growing F2P trend," (ibid, p. 5). This could likely become a reality and is something discussed later on in Chapter 6.0.

On the other hand, Alha et al. (2014) note that developers do not see any ethical issues with the model, with the exception of children's use of such games, as well as exorbitant spending. While the outlook of F2P game developers is generally positive, anticipating a promising future, Alha et al. (2014) suggest that this might be a form of cognitive dissonance, which also explains "the defensive stances the professionals took against critique," (p. 10).

Regardless of the opinions of players and developers, Evans (2015) finds that, similar to free software tools, F2P games attempt to promote a questionably inclusive image, "that makes them accessible to anyone with a tablet or smartphone without further economic outlay," (p. 574). While this might be true from an initial standpoint, Nieborg (2015) contests the universality of this image, citing the example of Zynga, which has a poor reputation among gamers, due to "how it operationalizes the free-to-play business model and its reliance on data-driven design methods," (p. 4).

Data-driven methods, as well as other decisions by gaming companies, such as implementing aggressive microtransactions and other dark patterns in their games, can theoretically influence their image in media and public discourse. Following the theory of public esteem, or "the degree to which the public likes, trusts, admires, and respects an organization" (Carroll, 2011, p. 224), business-oriented decisions executed by companies in their games can quickly earn disdain from their player base, resulting in a negative image. Companies and F2P games which focus excessively on commercial suc-

cess, instead of fostering a community, might have a financial appeal to investors but would still lack an emotional appeal to a general player base. An emotional appeal is an essential part of national reputation, as stated by Passow, Fehlmann & Grahlow (2005), and denotes the feelings of amiability, respect and honesty generated by organizations. Without an emotional appeal, a negative image can quickly be cultivated or enhanced. While organizations are not nations as such, they are responsible for public bodies, and therefore, it can be argued, they could be subject to the same kinds of reputational concerns and appeals.

3.0   Research Questions

This chapter deals with the major research questions and their respective sub-questions. First, however, some suggestions on the formulation of these research questions in virtual ethnographic research, as specified by Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce & Taylor (2012) are discussed. They find selecting research questions to be pivotal in ethnographies, with this decision influencing other factors, such as the selection of informants and field sites (ibid). Hence, formulating the correct research questions is key. Boellstorff et al. (2012) discuss the emergence of research questions and find that, in most cases, important research questions will arise when participant observation is already underway.

Flexibility is also central when constructing research questions within ethnographic research, and "ethnographers must be prepared to modify questions based on what they encounter in the field" (ibid, p. 54). Modifications to certain research questions (as well as new inquiries) were made in this ethnography, once connections began appearing between certain phenomena. Moreover, Boellstorff et al. (2012) state that personal interest plays a part in selecting appropriate research questions due to "all good science" flowing from a "scientist's passion to learn something he or she is deeply curious about," (p. 56). Hence, to a certain degree, the research questions within this study stem from the researcher's subjective involvement in digital games, their surrounding cultures, and player practices.

Overall, the following questions provide direction and ensure accuracy in data collection and analysis, as Boellstorff et al. (2012) recommend: "a grounding research question, once established, asserts and protects precision and focus," (p. 57).

- **RQ1.** How does the free-to-play payment model transform the various contexts of game culture?

Based on the central concept in this study's theoretical framework, research question one attempts to observe how the F2P payment model impacts each respective context of the circuit of culture (du Gay et al., 1997). The term 'transforms' in this RQ, and subsequent ones, denotes a process in which new phenomena or cultural practices appear, due to the application of the F2P model. These transformations are ideally something not seen in cultures of games employing traditional payment models, or changes in traditional gaming practices.

Cultures of games utilizing traditional payment models can be defined on the meso level, using their model as a unifying characteristic. *Traditional pay-to-play culture* can be defined as the culture of digital games from various genres, on diverse platforms, having a set price and without microtransactions (not utilizing the freemium model). Like-

wise, *subscription game culture* can be defined similarly, but with a subscription-based payment system. The transformations the freemium payment model brings to each of the contexts of the observed game's culture are further addressed in a sub-research question, to emphasize distinct cultural practices.

The term 'transformation,' as defined by Hepp (2015), means a process of specific changes. Compared to the term 'change' (Wandel in German), which simply describes how one thing is no longer as it once was, transformation denotes a more detailed process that is not accidental and follows a specific model or pattern. Due to following a certain pattern, transformations allow for regularity, and an explanation of the type and manner of changes taking place to be thoroughly described. Hence, this makes transformation an appropriate term when studying metaprocesses such as mediatization (ibid), or commercialization, which is the metaprocess of interest in this study. The patterns observed in this research, which notes the transformation process, are changes in cultural practices previously noted as typical for traditional pay-to-play games (based on surveyed literature), as well as the manifestation of new cultural practices.

Still, in this research, the term 'change' and its synonym 'alter' are sometimes used to indicate a modification of a situation from its previous state. These terms are different from the term 'transformation,' as they indicate a minor process that is part of the overall transformation. However, instead of using these terms haphazardly to indicate an accidental alteration that cannot be explained or typified, these terms are only used in combination with an exact explanation of the procedure, such as this alteration from the appropriation context noted later on: where the payment model alters the boundaries between the real world and game world, causing a spillover between the two. This can be observed when players' motivations transfer into the game world and some non-virtual realities transfer into the fictional game world.

The sub-questions under RQ1 follow a similar format as RQ1. They all utilize the word 'transform,' with each sub-question focusing on how the F2P business model specifically transforms one of the contexts of the observed game's culture. The five contexts of culture, which have been previously noted by du Gay et al. (1997), adapted to the study of games by Wimmer (2012), serve as the basis for each sub-research question.

- **RQ 1.1:** How does F2P transform the (re)production of the game?

Looking at this context of the circuit of culture, RQ1.1 observes the transformations the payment model has on the production of content, as well as the reproduction of original content. This means not only looking at how the free-to-play payment model transforms official game development itself, but user-generated content as well, such as the production of fanfiction, guides and art, and the replication of official content by users (e.g. fan-made games). Here the practices observed are mostly on the micro and meso level,

as indicated in the Elmezeny & Wimmer (2018) framework, since they deal with individual and cooperative production.

- **RQ1.2:** How does F2P transform individual appropriation of the game?

This sub-research question looks at how the payment model transforms the appropriation of games by individuals. This question attempts to look at how the freemium model transforms the way in which individuals integrate the game into their daily lives, through their interaction with each other and with the game itself. Interesting practices observed under this question could possibly include individual gameplay habits, as well as player interactions and rituals concerning the game, both within the virtual world and outside of it. Here practices of interest are mostly on the micro level, but sometimes on the meso level when concerning group and community practices.

- **RQ1.3:** How does F2P transform individual identification with the game?

Dealing with the context of identification, this sub-research question looks at the way the payment model transforms how individuals relate to the game, its community and its content. The interest here lies in how an individual's identity as a gamer changes their opinions and practices in free-to-play games, or how they signal their status within free-to-play game communities. Moreover, practices related to payment (microtransactions) and how they relate to an individual's identification with their purchased content, the game, or the community itself, can also be observed within the framework of this question. Under this RQ, practices of interest are mostly on the micro level.

- **RQ1.4:** How does F2P transform the regulation of the game by both producing and non-producing bodies?

While Wimmer (2012) states that the regulation context deals with non-producing bodies, in this study, the way the question is phrased expands the scope of the context to deal with the regulation of the game developer as well. The sub-research question attempts to observe how the freemium payment model transforms the regulation of F2P games by both the developer, users and other non-producing bodies. This includes looking at how the developer/publisher of the game regulates their product through official in-game rules, customer services and community management. Additionally, the question looks at informal rules enforced by users, as well as how institutions such as EU commissions and other governing bodies choose to regulate F2P games. Self-regulation practices, such as curbing playtime, is also of interest within this context. Here, practices observed are on the micro level when dealing with individual regulation, meso level when concerning cooperative or group regulation and macro level when regarding industry regulation.

- **RQ1.5:** How does F2P transform the representation of themes within the game and the game's image in media and public discourse?

The final sub-research question under RQ1 looks at how the payment model transforms both the game's image in media and public discourse, and the representation of certain themes within the game itself. The initial focus under this sub-research question is how the payment model transforms the image of the game itself in media and public discourse. This is done through analyzing the game's reputation in mainstream media, and other online outlets where the game and developer are frequently discussed. Additionally, within this context, the changes the payment model brings to the representation of themes within the game itself are observed, such as the integration of real-world aspects (currency, money, etc.) within fictional contexts. Moreover, the way in which other features are represented in the game is also of interest, such as notable players and the value of virtual items. Practices under this context are observed on the individual level (themes within the game) and macro level (representations in public discourse and mainstream media).

- **RQ2:** How do the various game culture contexts of an F2P game transform each other?

After observing how the payment model contributes to each respective context, this research question looks at how the contexts then transform each other. RQ2 follows the notion proposed by the circuit of culture, which assumes that each context is continuously affecting the others, thereby completing the circuit. The main interest in this research question lies in noting how the transformations detected in the sub-questions of RQ1 are linked to each other, and what types of relationship they might have. For example, how does individual appropriation of F2P games interact with an individual's identification with other players, the community or the game itself? Alternatively, one can observe how produced content, the result of the F2P payment model, changes individual appropriations of the game, causing new practices to arise, or resulting in certain representations of the game in media and public discourse.

The choice of the word 'transform' in RQ2 might seem odd, as contexts themselves are not actors and might not be able to directly bring about transformations in each other. However, this specific wording was selected for multiple reasons. Firstly, while the contexts themselves are not actors, RQ2 allows us to look at the various phenomena and practices of all actors within each of these contexts on the macro, meso and micro levels (observed during RQ1), and at how they interact with each other. Instead of addressing each actor or phenomenon and its interaction separately, the entire context is addressed as one unit interacting with another in order to simplify the analysis process.

Furthermore, the word 'transform,' Hepp (2015), denotes an observable change which follows a specific pattern. This makes 'transform' more suitable for this research question than other terms, such as influence or affect, as it allows for the answers to not only be able to make sense of specific transformations but also the patterns of the transfor-

mations themselves. As this is a qualitative analysis, 'transform' is better suited to it in terms of phrasing than either 'influence' or 'affect,' both of which imply a measurable outcome that requires a quantified system of measurement not viable in this ethnographic method. Moreover, 'transform' also allows the researcher to observe how the current state of the game culture has altered from its previous existing form. These fluctuations are indicated in the data by how participants express changes over time, or deviation in practices from different game communities/cultures. This is quite fitting for the research framework, since RQ1 has already investigated certain specifics of the current state of the game's cultural contexts, providing a basis for RQ2 and allowing for further deductions and analyses on the possible transformation of these contexts.

The F2P game culture in question refers to the culture of Goodgame Studios' Empire, the game observed in this ethnography. The F2P game culture term can also be applied to similar games using the freemium model, when employing a meso level definition of game culture (Elmezeny & Wimmer, 2018). The following chapter provides a detailed explanation of the research design and methodology, as well as an overview of Goodgame Empire and Goodgame Studios.

4.0 Ethnography of a Virtual World

The study of games (and their cultures) is multidisciplinary, and historically various schools of research have investigated different aspects of it, ranging from virtual economies (Castranova, 2005) to digital game involvement (Calleja, 2007), and looking at both the negative (Anderson, Gentile & Buckley, 2007) and the positive (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, 2006) effects of gameplay. What researchers choose to focus on in their studies is usually emphasized by how they choose to conduct their research, or the methods employed in data collection. Ribbens and Poels (2009) find that most common games research design focuses on either the game structure or the player, as distinct from the game itself. They note that this leads to a lack of empirical research concentrating on the interaction between the player and the game, or player experiences. Through ethnography, however, we are able to address this gap in empirical research through centering on player experiences, among other aspects. The specifics of the ethnographic method utilized, and data collection tools, are detailed in the following sections. First, however, is an overview of the research design of this study.

4.1 Research Design

This research is considered an ethnographic case study that utilizes multiple data collection methods and approaches to the analysis of said data. As with most ethnographies, this research is qualitative, providing in-depth insights about a specific community, as well as its activities and practices. Qualitative research is notably beneficial in describing individual experiences and explaining relationships (Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest & Namey, 2005). However, most importantly for our research, qualitative approaches are also excellent at describing group norms (ibid). Through this qualitative research, we are able to observe in detail the practices of both individuals and groups within the gaming community, as well as their experiences with the game itself, "by systematically working and toying with concrete examples of everyday life and culture," (Alasuutari, 1996, p. 374), all of which helps researchers to realize "such aspects of our mundane, self-evident reality as we have this far failed to see" (ibid, p. 374). Furthermore, using a qualitative approach does not only better help our understanding of the practices of interest, but also aids in reevaluating certain theories and developing a framework that can be applied to future studies of other relevant investigation (ibid). This is due to the nature of qualitative research, which "often has theoretical implications in additional to empirical results," (ibid p. 374). This is why Boellstorff et al. (2012) note that qualitative research can "yield profound insights that elude quantification," (p. 38).

The ethnography conducted is limited to just one free-to-play game (Empire) and its respective online communities. This focus on only one game (community) is customary in ethnography, allowing the researcher to provide detail without spreading his attention too thin. Hence, this ethnography can be considered a case study. Utilizing the Alasuutari (1996) hourglass approach, the researcher is able to use the case study to undertake new theoretical considerations and uncover empirical evidence that can be used for generalization, akin to quantitative work (ibid). The hourglass model is described by Alasuutari (1996) as beginning with "a rather broad theoretical and structural framework that places a particular research site in a large context," (p. 374). In that sense, previous game studies literature and the circuit of culture act as the broad theoretical framework, with Empire, the specific case being examined, placed in the larger context (of game culture). The second step, located in the heart of the hourglass, is considered fieldwork, when "one analyzes in detail a very specific, closely defined object of study as a world of its own," (Alasuutari, 1996, p. 374). During this stage, a detailed ethnography of the game Empire is conducted, comprised of various data collection methods, looking at the object of study "as a world of its own," (ibid, p. 374). This is a highly appropriate description for our research process as well, since our case is literally a virtual world with its own unique culture. The final phase of this research, which forms the bottom of the hourglass, is where "one assesses and discusses the results of the case study within the broader framework" (Alasuutari, 1996, p. 375). During this final phase, findings from the ethnography are compared to the theoretical framework, as well as the greater body of literature on other game cultures, placing them in a broader social and theoretical context.

To conduct an ethnography of a free-to-play game can be difficult for a number of reasons. Firstly, most F2P games tend to be mobile games providing casual experiences, which means that their usage primarily involves short, impromptu bursts of gameplay. Compared to desktop and other console, multiplayer games, mobile multiplayer games usually do not offer users a shared online space to communicate and socialize, such as chatrooms or the like, even when they do provide an option to play together. While this presents researchers with the opportunity of observing how mobile gamers play together, it entirely omits the option of observing player communication and socialization. Any communication options available are likely to be limited, compared to console and desktop counterparts.

Another restrictive aspect of mobile ethnographies is their invasive nature, when it comes to entering an individual's private sphere. For ethnographies of mobile games to be carried out, individuals would have to be observed not only in the virtual world (i.e. in the game they are playing), but also in the real world, during their gaming sessions. This is due to the nature of mobile games and the limited communication options they provide. This forces the researcher to probe into other areas, rather than simply interacting

in the virtual environment. In addition to creating an array of logistical problems, this could be unsettling for participants and create privacy concerns, when it comes to both observing them in the real world and monitoring their devices.

To remedy these restrictions, an ethnography of a F2P desktop browser game is proposed instead, one with a mobile equivalent. This approach is taken because, during virtual ethnographies, individuals willingly participate in a (public) virtual world and their actions (media practices) can be observed from behind a screen, without the need to alarm them unnecessarily. The actions of the participants can even be noted without their consent most of the time, due to their taking place in public spheres. This is akin to observation in public real-world locations[6], with consent only being required for observation that takes place in private spaces and conversations. Moreover, desktop browser games provide their participants with more communication options than their mobile counterparts.

Choosing an F2P desktop browser game for this study has also proven to be beneficial because there is a pressing need to address gaps in literature regarding these sorts of games. They have yet to be thoroughly explored in academic literature (Wimmer & Nickol, 2013), which is a shortcoming, as they are sociologically distinctive and provide "various communication tools and thus constitute a new form of media-based communication," (ibid, p.236). Therefore, by using an F2P browser game for this study, full ethnographic immersion in the virtual world environment is possible, utilizing a number of communicational tools to chat with participants and observe them in online settings.

The design of this research also includes additional considerations (deductive coding, theoretical sampling, etc.), some of which have been borrowed from other methodological approaches and assist in generalizing the qualitative data (Mayring, 2007). Firstly, the details of our modified virtual ethnography, as well as the background and history of the method, will be detailed. Prior to that, our empirical case, the F2P game, and its production company will be described, outlining the social context of this study.

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[6] For more on this, please refer to the Ethics Subchapter (4.7).

4.2. Research Object and Empirical Case: Goodgame Studio's Empire

Goodgame Empire (shortened to Empire) is a free-to-play, real-time strategy and castle building game launched in 2011. The game takes place in a medieval setting, where the player is initially tasked with constructing and maintaining their own castle lot. Using the troops, tools and resources found within their castles, users can attack both computer-controlled enemies (non-player characters: NPCs) and other players (player vs. player: PvP). To do so, users equip and upgrade commanders that lead their armies into battles. Users can also join alliances, where they work together to complete special events, or take part in server-wide battles. In the game world, players are able to communicate and interact in either through in-game messages or alliance chat, which can be observed by the researcher. These communication features provide a great channel for participant observation during gameplay.

Empire is a browser-based game, which can be accessed from any computer with a functioning browser. The game can be played in 26 different languages, and accessed on a multitude of public servers, both international and those local to specific countries. In 2013 a version of the game (Empire: Four Kingdoms) was launched for mobiles (iOS/Androids). However, the two games do not share servers and have completely separate userbases. In August 2017, Empire's lifetime revenue surpassed 800 million US dollars (Chapple, 2017). Being a browser game, Empire provides longer sessions of gameplay than most mobile F2P games, as well as being available to a wider demographic than those games requiring PCs with specific requirements.

In Empire, the player has access to five main resources: wood, stone, food, gold and rubies. The first three types of resource can all be produced by specific buildings constructed in the player's castle. Gold can be gathered from defeating NPCs and other players, as well as completing quests. Rubies, on the other hand, can only be infrequently collected from in-game tasks. As with most F2P games, rubies are considered a premium currency, and are primarily purchased with real-world currency. Naturally, rubies are the most powerful resource out of all those listed above. They can be traded for any other resource, used to skip certain processes, such as building construction or troop recruitment, and even used to purchase strong attacking or defensive units, tools, or items for commanders that are not regularly available through in-game quests. These features (multiple resources, premium currency, time skips) are not unique to Empire and are shared by quite a number of other F2P games, justifying the game's selection for the ethnography and allowing the results from the study to be related to other similar cases.

Empire has gone through various monetization cycles since its launch in 2011. At first, to attract a large player base, Empire was relatively accessible to all payment groups, even non-paying users. Between 2013 and 2017, Empire became very aggressively

monetized, implementing features that frustrated the community and even alienating some employees, all for the purpose of financial gain. Some of these features and mechanics will be discussed in Chapter 5.0. later on. Predictably, this movement towards aggressive monetization coincided with the time that Goodgame studios was at its largest, and most successful, as a company. Nevertheless, as Empire grew older, with its gameplay becoming stale and community numbers dwindling, its aggressive monetization lessened, with mechanics shifting to better accommodate longtime players. While the 18-month ethnography took place during the peak period of aggressive monetization, observation of the game continued during the writing and analysis process. Hence, even when less aggressive monetization changes do not constitute part of the analysis, they are nevertheless addressed later in the discussion (see Chapter 6.0). Still, changes in monetization have led to changes in perception of the game in public discourse and the community, which also make it an interesting case.

Goodgame Studios (GGS), the producer and developer of Empire, is an online games company founded in 2009 by brothers Kai and Christian Wawrzinek, and Fabian Ritter. The company, which began as a startup in 2009, has its headquarters in Hamburg, Germany, in addition to two other offices in Tokyo, Japan, and Seoul, South Korea. The company's inception began with a F2P poker game in 2009 (Goodgame Poker), where players would trade real money for gambling chips, and all their winnings would be virtual, meaning that they could not be cashed out. Goodgame Poker was followed by Goodgame Mafia, and Goodgame Café, both of which were also quite successful. However, the company only started to become prosperous in 2011, with Empire. The game managed to earn GGS multiple awards, such as Best Browser Game at the 2012 European Game Awards, and the 2013 Audience Award for MMO of the year.

Due to Empire's success, as well as its other popular game Big Farm, Goodgame grew from a small startup into a real corporate, which at its peak had more than 1100 employees (Career at Goodgame, n.d). This growth was reflected in the company's structure, with employees divided into semi-autonomous units (business development, customer operations, specific game development, quality assurance, etc.). While some units worked closely with each other, others were completely disconnected, to the extent of being housed on a totally different campus at the Hamburg headquarters. This was the case for customer operations and quality assurance units, for example, which were kept further from the core marketing and game development units. Having such a grandiose corporate structure arguably creates a positive business image; however, it can also transform the mindset and identities of the employees working for the company itself (see Subchapter 5.3.1.3.).

In 2017, Goodgame Studios' lifetime revenue breached the one-billion-dollar mark, signifying that the company was highly successful (Cowley, 2017). Nevertheless, GGS al-

so had plenty of fiscal problems. In 2016, it dismissed approximately 400 employees, and later in 2017, another 200 were let go of (Francis, 2017). In a letter to the online publication *Gamasutra*, Kai Wawrzinek claimed that these layoffs were "due to the difficulty of maintaining success in the free-to-play games sector" (Wawrzinek as cited in Francis, 2017, n.p). What possibly also proved to be problematic for GGS was that it was no longer an autonomous studio. At the end of 2017, it was acquired for €270 million by Stillfront, a global group of gaming studios specialized in F2P games, and joined 11 others, including Unravel's developer Codwood. Christian and Kai Wawrzinek were asked to sit on Stillfront's board of directors, which Kai describes as "a consequent step towards our long-term vision of creating one of the world's leading gaming companies," (Wawrzinek as cited in Handrahan, 2017).

Overall, given its accessibility, shared features with multiple other F2P games, and changes in reputation due to its business approach, Empire and Goodgame Studios are theoretically interesting. Using this type of case is beneficial when making generalizations from a single case study in qualitative research (Mayring, 2007).

4.3.   Ethnography as a Method

Traditionally, ethnographers "have entered the spaces of their participants to gain a deeper understanding of how people experience, perceive, create, and navigate the social world," (Hallett and Barber, 2014, p. 307). One official description of the process provided by Burawoy, Burton, Ferguson & Fox (1991) is "the study of people in their own time and space, in their own everyday lives," (p. 2). Burawoy et al. (1991) argue that it is best to study people in their natural habitats so as to better understand the gaps between dialogs and practices, positioning the occurrences of "an everyday life within larger social structures," (Hallett and Barber, 2014, p. 307). In general, ethnography can be considered an interpretative method that attempts to "to make meaning of culture," (Beneito-Montagut, 2011, p. 729). In today's society, with the permeation of the internet and communication technologies, Hallett and Barber (2014) find it "no longer imaginable to conduct ethnography without considering online spaces," (p. 307).

Due to this growing importance of online spaces, it is no surprise that an influx of various styles of online ethnography has developed in recent years: "Ethnography analyses human practices in the context of culture and now the internet is part of our culture," (Beneito-Montagut, 2011, p. 718). All of the following approaches see a methodological necessity in adapting classical ethnographic techniques to digital contexts, "therefore somewhat virtualizing them… skillfully mixing digital techniques with analogical techniques (e.g., participant observation online and offline)," (Caliandro, 2017, p. 5). Some of these updated ethnographic approaches include cyber-ethnography (Escobar, 1994), virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000), internet ethnography (Miller and Slater, 2001), digital ethnography (Murthy, 2008), netnography (Kozinets, 2010), expanded ethnography (Beneito-Montagut, 2011), media ethnography (Pink et al., 2016) and the method selected for this study: ethnography of virtual worlds (Boellstorff et al., 2012).

Utilizing an ethnography to study F2P games is beneficial, as most studies to date have focused on big-data, quantitative methods (Paavilainen, Koskinen, Hamari, Kinnunen, Alha, Keronen & Mäyrä, 2016), consumer-oriented marketing information (Sinclair, 2014), or other qualitative methods which focus on highly specific aspects of game culture: e.g. developers (Alha et al. 2014; Jordan et al. 2016), app platforms (Nieborg, 2015) or players' perspectives (Lin & Sun, 2007). Ethnography of virtual worlds, however, is a method which allows researchers to address multiple facets of the culture at the same time, giving them the ability to observe both developers and users, as well as aspects such as gameplay mechanics or themes presented in the game itself.

Furthermore, ethnography can be beneficial due to its ability to provide qualitative approaches to studying pursuits that are usually approached in a quantitative manner, such as aspects of identification and gamer identity, for example (Shaw, 2013). Using ethnography of virtual worlds, the researcher is able to answer specific questions re-

garding media practices, ones that are not clear even when utilizing other qualitative methods, such as content or discourse analysis. "Only ethnography can begin to answer questions about what people really do with media, rather than what we imagine they might do, or what close readings of texts assume they might do," (Bird, 2003, p.191). Hence, applying an ethnographic method to the research of free-to-play games can ensure addressing specific gaps and phenomena revolving around the media practices of these games and their communities.

Finally, one gap that is yet to be tackled in the study of F2P games, regardless of how much it may be addressed in other academic pursuits and the mainstream press, is that of player experiences (Pirinen, 2016). Ethnography can be beneficial for focusing on player experiences, because not only does the researcher immerse him or herself in the community, interacting with players and extracting data from first-hand involvement, but they also then tend to undergo gameplay events themselves, noting the accounts and analyzing the journey throughout, for a richer and more nuanced experience. Hence, ethnography as a method can result in thoughtful insights about player experiences through the researcher's intimate contact with players, immersion in the research environment, and extreme familiarity with the research object itself.

Moving on to our selected ethnographic method, ethnography of virtual worlds, we first have to determine what constitutes a virtual world. Boellstorff et al. describe virtual worlds as having four qualities:

> First, they are places and have a sense of worldness. They are not just spatial representations but offer an object-rich environment that participants can traverse and with which they can interact. Second, virtual worlds are multi-user in nature...Third, they are persistent: they continue to exist in some form even as participants log off…Fourth, virtual worlds allow participants to embody themselves, usually as avatars (even if 'textual avatars,'…) (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 7)

Empire fits the description of a virtual world, hence this approach is the most appropriate method for its study, rather than the approaches of cyberethnography (Hallett & Barber, 2014) and digital ethnography (Pink et al. 2016). These other methods, while providing many similar data collection tools and analytical principles, do not deal with the specific contexts of online virtual worlds, such as considerations concerning field site selection both inside and outside of the game, or data collection while playing online. Therefore, the ethnography of virtual worlds approach by Boellstorff et al. (2012) is utilized in this research, featuring aspects that differ from traditionally defined virtual ethnography (Beneito-Montagut, 2011), including a consideration of life outside the virtual world and other offline contexts (Boellstorff et al., 2012).

Boellstorff et al.'s (2012) approach is a virtualized form of classic ethnography in many ways. However instead of focusing on a single field site, it is considered a multi-sited

ethnography, which "may thus be useful for capturing a holistic picture of the life of a community or activity," (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 60). This means that, instead of conducting participant observation in only one location (the game world), we follow informants to other online spaces, dedicated to discussion and community activities. Marcus (1995) suggests that ethnographers do this to better understand "social issues embedded within a complex, globalized world," (as cited in Hallett and Barber, 2014, p. 311). Caliandro (2017) stresses the importance of multi-sited ethnography, mentioning that it is important to "follow the medium and follow the natives" (p. 9) for effective ethnography of social media environments.

Hallett and Barber (2014) find epistemological value in considering interactions within overlapping online spaces. The same considerations are also made in this research. For example, people who post on Empire's message board do not necessarily represent the majority of players in the game world. Their opinions might therefore only be representative of a niche collection of players. The opposite is also true: it is possible that most people who play Empire do not post on message boards or participate in other online spaces. This makes it imperative that all possible spaces are observed, in hopes of collecting the largest scope of individual practices, opinions and experiences.

The selected ethnography is not completely virtual, however, and also includes multiple considerations of offline contexts: "Depending on the research and its questions, we may find ourselves weaving together online and offline contexts and components in the fieldwork," (Boellstorff et al. 2012, p. 61). This includes looking at relevant offline characteristics or affiliations of our informants, including political, family and work structures, as well as other relationships between real world concerns and the virtual world. These offline contexts were mostly investigated during in-depth interviews, where it was possible to probe individuals in more detail, asking about real-world social situations, such as their family and work lives.

Ethnography is not without its limitations. Still, it is a flexible method that is reshaped by changes in online environments (Caliandro, 2017) and so some variations have been made, where appropriate, to Boellstorff et al.'s (2012) approach. The method has on occasion been criticized for not being able to provide sufficient data to generalize, given the small size of the sample (Beneito-Montagut, 2011). However, with the use of the hourglass model (Alasuutari, 1996), some claims that are applicable to a sample larger than the one-game culture closely examined can hopefully be made. Moreover, ethnography requires dealing with large amounts of data, which is time consuming and overwhelming (Beneito-Montagut, 2011). Using a structured theoretical framework, however, as well as focused data analysis techniques (see Subchapter 4.8.), one is able to handle sizeable amounts of data in a time effective manner. A final concern is the risk of the researcher changing participants' behavior by partaking in the interaction (ibid). Never-

theless, this was avoided as much as possible by adhering to specific ethical guidelines (see Subchapter 4.7.).

Boellstorff et al.'s (2012) ethnographic approach allows for multiple ways of data collection. Out of the various suggested data collection methods, those selected for this research were limited to in-depth interviews, participant observation and the archiving of relevant message board threads and news stories. The suggestion by Ribbens and Poels (2009) to triangulate methods in the hope of enhancing the study of player experiences was also undertaken, albeit with a different constellation of tools. They originally suggested the use of diaries, focus groups and video commentary to observe player interactions with the game (ibid). Since in this ethnography, the area of interest extends beyond player experiences and into other cultural practices, a variety of methods focused on observing interactions are made use of instead.

4.4.   Participant Observation

Participant observation is considered the "cornerstone of ethnography," (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 65), and is the one method of data collection that is fundamental, above all others. To conduct participant observation in ethnography, the researcher has to engage with the community and become known to his or her informants: "Through participant observation, ethnographers step into the social frame in which activity takes place," (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 65). Taking part in the daily activities of a community provides insights into the significance of these practices. Moreover, participant observation highlights various cultural customs or beliefs that participants might not be consciously aware of or able to discuss in interviews (ibid). This method of data collection is a balancing act between taking part in the everyday activities of the culture and recording and analyzing these practices (ibid).

Participating in the community means joining in with a number of activities, however, participation does not have to occur at every level. This means that the researcher does not have to go as far as hardcore gamers do in devising and digesting gaming strategies: "Participant observation is not unreflective engagement; it is a refined craft that entails a particular kind of joining in and a particular way of looking at things that depends on the research question, field site, and practical constraints," (Boellstorff et al, 2012, p. 65). Nevertheless, there is still a need for the researcher to have some practical knowledge of the group whose activities they will be participating in, "such as how to behave appropriately…or realization of some of the challenges," (ibid. p. 66). The researcher arrives at this sort of information through their membership in the community, while specialized knowledge, such as specific language skills, "can be leveraged to move effectively in a field setting," (ibid. p. 66). In this research, participant observation began with previous knowledge of the challenges and problems affecting F2P gaming, such as those mentioned in the theoretical framework (see Chapter 2.0). Within ethnography of such virtual worlds, researchers can participate more deeply than real world ethnography, which requires them to acquire certain skills (ibid). Due to this, there was a need to learn the basics of gameplay, and some more advanced intricacies of Empire, which allowed the researcher to progress far enough to form meaningful connections with players of a higher level.

Defining the setting for participant observation is critical (Beneito-Montagut, 2011). As mentioned earlier, there is value in considering overlapping online spaces, so as to observe a greater spectrum of individuals and activities. This participant observation initially began in the Empire game world, through observing individuals on the world map and through their communication with the researcher through personal mail. Later, the observation progressed to the researcher's participation as an alliance member (guilds in Empire). Here, observation occurred primarily through alliance chat, which is available

to all members, as well as private conversations through in-game mail. Aside from the in-game world, participant observation also occurred in other Empire and online gaming communities, primarily the official Empire forums and gaming Reddit forums. To be considered an online community, a space has to meet four requirements: interactivity, having more than two communicators, there being a common, public space where people can interact, and a continued membership over time (Gruzd, Wellman & Takhteyev, 2011). Our online spaces met these four requirements and, while some of them (Reddit communities) also dealt with games other than Empire, the researcher focused on participating in and recording relevant information (comments) concerning the play and practices of Empire, or other games employing the F2P model.

As for the duration of participant observation, Boellstorff et al. (2012) recommend a minimum of one year or longer for multi-sited ethnographies, which ensures immersion in the community through sufficient time being spent engaging with it. In this ethnography, participant observation occurred for a period of *18 months*, from October 2015 until March 2017. During this time, the researcher participated in the gaming world and online communities, leveling their account and recording observations in extensive field notes. The field notes were organized on a regular basis with dates and timestamps, and all fitted into one of three general observation categories dealing with either gameplay, community or monetization. The notes were recorded in an approximately 200-page document, which included relevant and illustrative screenshots. Instead of using a two-boxing method, which involves using two computers — one for play and one for recording field notes (Boellstorff et al. 2012) — the researcher simply used one computer. This is because Empire is a browser game and is not too graphically demanding; it can be played while concurrently conducting other computational activities, and there are natural pauses in gameplay that allowed the researcher to regularly minimize the browser and record important information.

After the initial induction period, the researcher contacted informants when joining an alliance. As suggested by Boellstorff et al. (2012), care was taken when recruiting informants. They were told from the beginning about the intentions of the researcher and his study objectives. In addition to this, first contact was always made through a group gatekeeper (ibid), the alliance leader in this case, who could vouch for the researcher and help to build trust with other members of the group. The recruited informants highlighted other online communities that the researcher should observe, including specific forums and Reddit communities to which the participant observation eventually expanded. As is customary for this data collection method, attention was given not only to what participants were saying, but also to how they behaved and their practices in the game. Overall, within the game world, around 90 participants were observed, and they hailed from two different alliances, which the researcher was part of during the 18-month long ethnography. The observation of all online spaces continued until no new phenomena

were being recorded. Still, even when official participant observation had ended, light surveillance continued to occur. This involved the researcher browsing online communities and occasionally checking his in-game account, amending field notes and supplementing them with information as needed.

Overall, this form of data collection provided a flexible approach that could be adapted in response to the intricacies of the culture being researched. Additionally, it provided a holistic view of the Empire community or culture, highlighting diverse activities and interactions, and providing insight into issues that "no amount of quantification can fully illuminate," (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 67). The practices and phenomena observed during this stage of data collection were then later expanded upon, using statements from the in-depth interviews conducted.

4.5.   In-depth Interviews

Interviews are central to this study, as with any ethnographic research. Boellstorff et al. (2012) state that they cannot think of any ethnographies that did not contain interviews. However, conducting interviews alone is insufficient. As a result, in our ethnography, in-depth interviews are used to supplement other data collected from participant observation (Boyce & Neale, 2006). This method of data collection is effective in gathering very detailed information on sensitive subjects (ibid), some of which informants may feel too reserved to share in a group chat, such as the amount of money spent on in-game items or currency. Moreover, in-depth interviews provide interpretative responses, or "the connections and relationships a person sees between particular events, phenomena, and beliefs," (Mack et al. 2005, p. 30) which is something participant observation cannot provide. This is a critical part of describing communities and cultures, since "the meanings people give to their actions and the world around them form an essential component of understanding," (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 92). Interviews also provide an opportunity for members to comment on intricate features of their community, for "informants can sometimes be eloquent commentators about their cultures, as ethnographers have long noted" (ibid, p. 93). Such interviews allow participants to provide insights into practices that the researcher might have missed or not been familiar with. Nevertheless, in-depth interviews are not without their limitations; they can be affected by researcher bias and can be time intensive (Boyce and Neale, 2006). Care was taken to carry out effective and ethical interviewing, with the aim of ensuring that participants were neither being primed nor left to get bored (Boellstorff et al., 2012).

For this ethnography, 10 semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with both Empire gamers and professionals from the company (see Table 6 for a full list of participants). A smaller number of participants was seen as preferable, to gain richer insights into the cultural practices and phenomena. Semi-structured interviews were selected, as they provide a mixture of flexibility and preparedness that is essential for effective interviewing (Boellstorff et al., 2012). The interview guideline was developed based on theoretical implications from the circuit of culture (du Gay et. al, 1997), as well as practices and phenomena of interest that arose during participant observation. A pre-test of the guideline was conducted with one game professional from GGS and one Empire player. Changes to the guideline were then made based on the pretest. This resulted in a final interview guideline comprising 25 questions (not including follow-ups), divided into four sections: spending, play and ownership (appropriation and identification context), regulation in-and-out of game (regulation context), interaction with players (appropriation and identification), and opinion on the free-to-play monetization model. The guideline was altered for interviews with professionals, with the spending, play and ownership section supplemented by one on game mechanics (adding the production context), as

well as an additional section added that addressed the practices GGS professionals observe within the community, as regulators.

Five individuals were game players from the alliance that the researcher was part of, while the other five individuals were professionals, employed by Goodgame Studios (GGS), and working on Empire. The professionals were all working in the customer relations department, as either community managers or customer service representatives. This ensured that they had the largest amount of contact with members of the community and were familiar with their issues, either through the official game forums or through ticketing system, in which the users complained about their issues. Hence these interviews with professionals could investigate all the five contexts of the circuit of culture, as opposed to only the context of production when interviewing developers, or representation when interviewing those responsible for marketing and PR. Additionally, with F2P games functioning more like services than products (see Subchapter 2.1.), there is more emphasis on customer services and community management, making these roles quite central in any company.

The range of participants was steered by strategic selection (Alasuutari, 1996), instead of purposive sampling (Mack et al., 2005). However, interviews continued until theoretical saturation, meaning until no new insights or answers were being gained from repeated interviews. The decision to use strategic selection was done in order to provide a "unified picture of different cultural logics," (Alasuutari, 1996, p. 376) within the same community, and concerning the relevant contexts of Empire culture.

Interviews were conducted both face-to-face and online. Face-to-face interviews took place with game professionals in Hamburg, where the company is based. Participants were interviewed in their homes with no one else present, to ensure complete privacy (Mack et. al, 2006). These interviews were all longer than an hour on average, with the longest being one hour and twenty minutes and the shortest one hour and five minutes. The interviews were recorded and verbal consent to do this was acquired at the beginning of each conversation. As for the interviews with gamers, all of them (except for one interview with the alliance leader) were conducted using instant messaging chat on the community application 'Discord'. The alliance leader was interviewed using Skype voice chat, and the call lasted exactly one hour. The other chat interviews lasted between one and two hours, due to the time taken to type out replies. Consent was also acquired at the beginning of these interviews, whether typed out in chat or spoken.

Table 6: Profiles of interview participants; names have been changed to provide anonymity.

Name	Age	Gender	Occupation	Gamer Identification	In-game Spending
Zelda	30	F	Community Manager and Customer Service Representative	Casual Gamer	None
Arcanine	26	M	Community Manager	Hardcore Gamer	None
Gul'dan	31	M	Customer Operations Coach / Game Expert	Hardcore Gamer	Occasional
Weasley	36	M	Community Manager	Regular Gamer	None
Lara	31	F	Customer Service Representative	Non-gamer	None
Lowlander	62	M	Service Tech	Regular Gamer	Constant
6eyes	53	M	Project Manager	Non-gamer	Budgeted spending
Eek	62	M	Retired	Non-gamer	Occasional
Mr. X	64	M	Engineer Surveyor	Regular Gamer	Budgeted spending
Pott	55	M	Gardener	Regular Gamer	Occasional

Some additional considerations were made for the text interviews, due to the nature of the method. Firstly, textual listening was applied. This is a skill closely associated with online research, that requires an understanding of "the nuances and conventions of online communication," (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 101). This can include not only acronyms, like lol (laugh out loud) and jk (just kidding), but also other "typographic conventions" (ibid, p. 101) such as emotes (e.g. :), :(, :/) and their connotations. Moreover, attention was given to the "typing" indicator compared to the length of the interviewees' answers, to ascertain whether participants were censoring themselves or hesitant to reply to certain questions. One limitation to these online interviews comes through the lack of facial expressions (ibid). However, this was balanced through particularly close textual listening and understanding.

The social desirability of interview respondents was addressed through special questioning techniques customary of in-depth interviews (Mack et al., 2006). By not prompting interview participants and only using appropriate follow up questions, the social desirability bias of respondents was reduced as much as possible. However, there is always the researchers own bias to take into consideration and how this might have influenced the participants own responses. Still, through remaining objective in speech, text and body language, and practicing proper questioning techniques, the researcher attempted to reduce both his own biases and the social desirability of respondents.

Once all interviews had been completed, transcription was conducted using 'Transcriptions' software for the MacOs operating system: a basic software that provides rich text files with time stamps. Boellstorff et al. (2012) argue that for some researchers, transcription is considered data collection, while for others, it is part of the data analysis phase. In this research, transcription fits both stages. While it is not fully-fledged data analysis, certain notes were made and used to improve the coding agenda used for the data analysis stage.

4.6.   Other Data Collection Methods

Within this ethnography, other data sources were used to supplement the field notes for participant observation and interview transcripts. These were primarily the archives of news articles, as well as forum posts and their corresponding user comments. Noted in this subchapter is also the usage of screenshots, chat logs, and virtual artifacts from within the game.

Chat logs and screenshots were used to complement the field notes and illustrate certain practices. Screenshots are not used in isolation and are always put in context with the use of other notes, since they "are most usefully treated as representations of aspects of culture; not recordings of whole cultures or of symbols that will have complete or fixed meanings," (Pink, 2007, p. 75). Chat logs were also essential in data collection as they contain, "a wide range of intermingled ethnographic data, from formal interviews to informal conversations and environmental data," (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 114). Unlike other MMORPGS, chat log data cannot be exported in Empire, therefore, essential pieces of alliance chat and longer casual chat sessions were manually captured in browser screenshots. Screenshots were also used to capture certain virtual artifacts (specific in-game items or tools), interactions between players, or key elements within game design and execution, such as popup offers to buy in-game currency or items. Capturing virtual artifacts proved useful in initiating conversation with informants, as well as adding to the analysis, helping to answer issues regarding the use of virtual items in signaling group membership or constructing personal identity. As suggested by Boellstorff et al (2012), screenshots used have all been edited to preserve the privacy of the players, changing or covering their names when possible.

A key principle in ethnography is following informants to other online spaces, however, there is a need to archive data obtained there (Boellstorff et al., 2012). In this case, informants were followed to the official Empire forums, as well as a suggested number of general Reddit gaming boards. While data collected from these sources is important, it is not analyzed in isolation, and is placed in context with participant observation data and interviews because both official and non-official forums "often attract particular players who may not accurately reflect the community at large and, if studied out of context, misrepresent player perspectives," (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 119). Based on issues raised during participant observation or interviews, forum posts were selected purposively for analysis from the official Empire boards. The selection was done to provide a complete picture of cultural logistics, as suggested by Alasuutari (1996). They addressed issues such as the fairness of the game and the price of certain items. Broader issues regarding free-to-play were tackled on general Reddit boards and social media threads or user comments. Specific user comments from various threads and social media posts were then archived and added to the field notes.

In addition to this archiving, news articles and their corresponding user comments were also collected. Articles were again sampled purposively, selected when dealing with issues concerning Empire, its development company (GGS), or other information relevant to the core themes of the research, such as controversies surrounding F2P games, their specific practices (microtransactions), development or regulation. In total, there were 30 articles and complete forum threads selected for coding.

4.7.   Ethical Considerations

For this research, certain ethical considerations and steps were taken to ensure that the research was conducted properly. All the information within this study was obtained from public domains. This includes usernames, individual posts and other data available on official Empire servers, as well as Reddit forums. Within the game, the researcher acted as a normal player, however on message boards, the researcher did not get involved in conversations. Moreover, the researcher did not conduct any acts of deception or subterfuge, such as experimenting on participants or posting comments using a fake identity, both of which are approaches classically rejected by ethnographers (Boellstorff et al., 2012). In the following section, we discuss ethical considerations put forward by Boellstorff et al. (2012) as essential to conducting good ethnographic research, such as the principles of care, consent, and anonymity, and the concepts of deception and the accuracy of portrayals.

The principle of care, as described by Boellstorff et al. (2012) suggests "taking good care" of informants (p. 130). This, however, extends beyond not hurting them. It also means making sure that they are rewarded in some way for their participation in the research. In this ethnography, special care was taken not to harm any informants within the game, either by disclosing private information they gave, or through specific in-game actions. Additionally, informants were regularly gifted with in-game items, both after interviews and when helping the researcher out with a problem or a question in-game. These gifts primarily consisted of attack and defense tools circulated between alliance members. Additionally, after the ethnography was completed, the researcher's account was handed over to the alliance leader to redistribute the virtual assets as they saw fit. This included reassigning castle outposts or settlements, which can be taken over by other accounts. These outposts are considered valuable, as they produce resources and act as extensions to the main castle.

With regard to consent, participants were asked to give their consent to being interviewed before the interviews took place. This was recorded verbally for face-to-face interviews and in text for chat interviews. With participation observation, although it occurs in public spaces, some practitioners of the method consider it morally questionable that participants not be asked to consent to being observed (Beneito-Montagut, 2011). Therefore, consent was received from most participants (when possible) by having the alliance leader explain the researcher's position and goals in joining the alliance. Members were given a chance to refuse and be omitted from the observation. No members chose to be omitted from observation, even when they had declined to be interviewed. As suggested by Boellstorff et al. (2012), informants were also regularly updated about the status of the research, in order to maintain good relationships.

An important ethical step for many ethnographic studies is providing anonymity to participants, protecting identities and any confidential information (ibid). In this research, anonymity is provided by fabricating all the names of interview participants, as well as the players observed. Names have also been blurred out in screenshots using photo editing software. Some names of users posting on public message boards have been preserved, however; since the information is publicly available to anyone looking for it. Boellstorff et al. (2012) also suggest the fabrication of collective identities, such as guilds, and even changing parts of events. While the names of the alliances have been changed, events have been recounted as they occurred. This is because none of the issues dealt with were sensitive enough to need modification.

A final ethical consideration for this study is the question of how to attempt an accurate portrayal of the F2P Empire game culture. This can be challenging, as data analysis is an interpretative task: "An ethnography is an interpretation; it is neither God's truth nor the final word," (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 149). Nevertheless, care was taken to present the most precise and fair portrayal of the lives, practices and actions of the informants, and GGS. This process continues throughout, even when dealing with confidential and troubling issues, such as questionably large amounts of money spent in-game, or family and work troubles incurred due to Empire gameplay.

4.8.   Data Analysis

In order to answer the research questions mentioned earlier, the goal of data analysis is divided between analyzing cultural patterns and pinpointing differences between the culture in this case study and others. When analyzing cultural patterns, we adhere to Hepp's (2009) suggestion on researching media cultures, observing patterns on all three levels established in theories of social constructivism: "a mentalistic (emphasizing the relevance of classificatory systems), a textual (emphasizing the relevance of discursive formations) and a praxeological (emphasizing the relevance of everyday meaning production through practices)" (p. 9). In simplified terms, this means that the interest in cultural patterns is not only in what people do (practices), but also what they say (or write) and how they perceive themselves and other groups.

The practices analyzed for each context are viewed on either the micro level when dealing with individuals or individual contexts, the meso level when dealing with organizations or group constructs, and finally, the macro level when dealing with the highest construct or culture as a whole (Elmezeny & Wimmer, 2018). The view of cultural practices on a specific level is applied to each context dependent on the nature and phrasing of the research question. For example, when analyzing the transformation the model brings to themes within the game, this is considered viewing practices on the micro level. However, when observing the transformation the model has on the game's image in media and public discourse, this is considered viewing practices on the macro level (Elmezeny & Wimmer, 2018). Nevertheless, for RQ2, staying true to the circuit of culture framework, which states that the contexts are continuously occurring and influencing each other (du Gay et al., 1997), the practices are observed on multiple levels (micro, meso and macro) simultaneously. This is important since the objective of this research question is to analyze how the contexts transform each other, and because contexts are not actors, transformations are empirically observed through the actors within them, on the micro (individuals), meso (groups and organizations) and macro level (culture as a whole).

In this work, methods from ethnographic data analysis (Boellstorff et al. 2012) and qualitative content analysis, as dictated by Mayring (2000), are combined. This is done to systemize ethnographic data analysis and ensure a more organized approach. First, the specifics borrowed from ethnographic analysis will be stated, followed by the qualitative content analysis process.

Ethnographic data analysis is a complex process that involves pattern recognition and requires flexibility (Boellstorff et al., 2012). Some aspects of Boellstorff et al.'s (2012) method are integrated into this analysis, such as noting reflections during fieldwork, and utilizing a non-linear analytical process, weaving together the steps of data collection and analysis. In our case, this includes taking down specific notes, aside from partici-

pant observation data, to later be integrated into our analysis process and coding agenda. The majority of data analysis, though, took place after the field work was completed (ibid), which is also in line with Mayring's (2000) qualitative data analysis process.

When working with the three types of data obtained (participant observation, transcripts and archived posts/news), specific considerations from ethnographic analysis were utilized. For participant observation data, the main objective was to discover patterns and important issues for participants. Through participation, attempts were also made to understand the culture from the inside. Moreover, data that was contradictory to our assumptions is also included, as this can "often open up the possibility of new and unexpected discoveries or serve to illuminate our understanding of cultural norms," (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 169). When working with participant observation data, Mill's (1959) concept of 'sociological imagination' was also important, suggesting that we should "move in and out of the data, observing it at different scales, from the most minute detail to the broadest overall pattern of culture," (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 169).

Interview data (transcripts), on the other hand, was analyzed in the context of other data and not in isolation (ibid). This means that interview transcripts were constantly compared to findings from participant observation, and put into context. The most common form of assessment is comparing what people say to their actual practices (ibid.). Moreover, interview data is used to highlight how informants speak about certain issues and cultural practices, not just what they say. For example, this might include whether they feel comfortable or guilty when disclosing how much money they spend on the game. Finally, direct quotes are used from interviews to "bring our participants to life…and add authenticity to our characterization of cultures," (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 172). This could also include anecdotes or stories recounted by interviewees dealing with phenomena of interest.

At the same time, working with archived forum posts and news articles, it was important to use this data to detail the specifics of phenomena discussed in interviews and participant observation, but not to overload the analysis (ibid.). Informed by knowledge of the culture, the main objective was to thematically organize this textual data to fit other patterns spotted in interviews and participant observation (ibid). A constant in working with all these types of data is the integration of theory, using it as a lens to view said data and maintain dialogue with it (ibid.). The context provided by the circuit of culture (du Gay et al., 1997) and other important concepts from the theoretical framework (see Chapter 2.0) are used to observe different viewpoints of social reality (Alasuutari, 1996), which is also a key step in the selected process of Mayring's (2000) qualitative content analysis.

The main benefit of utilizing Mayring's (2000) analysis process is "to preserve the advantages of quantitative content analysis as developed within communication science

and to transfer and further develop them to qualitative-interpretative steps of analysis," (p. 1). Classically, content analysis can be defined as "the use of replicable and valid method [sic] for making specific inferences from text to other states or properties of its source," (Krippendorff, 1969, as cited in Mayring, 2000, p. 3). This analysis process is centered around text interpretation, and focuses on: fitting analyzed material into a model of communication (the circuit of culture, in our case), having rules for the analysis (a procedure), having categories in the center of the analysis (text is put into specific codes) and having criteria for reliability and validity (Mayring, 2000). Due to these reasons, and a more systematic coding process, Mayring's (2000) approach was selected over Krippendorf's (2004) qualitative content analysis approach. Additionally, this method was chosen over grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), as there is substantial existing theory on game cultures, serving as a basis for deductive codes as well as inspiration for inductive ones.

While a more exploratory, analytical approach might seem suitable given the circuit of cultural framework, the selected data analysis method which combines approach from Mayring (2000) and Boellstorff et al. (2012) is not completely without exploration. The merged procedure has multiple coding phases, of which the first is completely exploratory, and allows for the development of inductive categories based on the observation of cultural practices. This phase is inline with the circuit of culture framework, while later steps of data analysis allow for the systemization of qualitative data, and the thematization of codes to successfully answer the research questions.

The procedure we follow is made up of four primary steps: inductive category development, deductive category development, coding agenda construction, and finally, the application of the agenda to data. The systemization and process for the category developed is taken from Mayring's approach (2000), while contextual considerations and interpretation of data is borrowed from Boellstorff et al.'s (2012) ethnography of virtual worlds' approach (for an overview of the combined analysis process please refer to Figure 5).

As with ethnography's suggestion of emergent analysis (Boellstorff et al., 2012), inductive category development consists of the formulation of codes through dealing with collected data. Here, codes are developed through a preliminary analysis of the data and guided by research interests and a theoretical background (Mayring, 2000). Some examples of inductive codes are: tiered customer service (production context), budgeting in play (appropriation context), gamer identity and pay status (identification context) and representing value in-game (representation context).

The next step is deductive category development. Here, categories are built based on previous surveyed literature and the theoretical framework: "The main idea here is to give explicit definitions, examples and coding rules for each deductive category, deter-

mining exactly under what circumstances a text passage can be coded with a category," (Mayring, 2000, p. 5). Some examples of deductive categories include dark patterns in game design (production context [Zagal et al., 2013]), social relationships and integration into daily routine (appropriation context [Wimmer & Nickol, 2013]), gamer identity (identification context [Shaw, 2013]) and self-regulation (regulation context [Woodford, 2013]). In most cases, deductive codes are inspired by surveyed literature but not directly adapted from it. For example, codes dealing with the appropriation context are adapted from Wimmer & Nickol's (2013) interview guideline sections. However, not all sections were selected because their focus is on how games are domesticated and appropriated into daily (social) life, while the question in this research is how F2P games are appropriated by individuals. Hence, the entire coding scheme could not be properly adapted, and only the relevant categories were chosen and supplemented by inductive codes.

Subsequently, both types of category were combined to create a coding agenda (Mayring, 2000). A pre-test was conducted on approximately 25% of the material, making sure to apply the agenda to all types of data: interview transcripts, field notes, and articles or posts. After the pre-test, categories and coding rules were revised, with unnecessary codes removed and those that were too similar merged. The five main codes in the coding agenda are built on the theory of the circuit of culture (du Gay et al, 1997). Each of these main codes coheres with one of the contexts of Empire's game culture (*regulation, appropriation*, etc.). Under each of these main codes are sub-codes that deal with specific practices or phenomena distinct to each of these contexts. For example, under the context of (re)production, there are the sub-codes of *Design* and *Maintenance*, and each of these sub-codes is then further divided into other sub-codes. *Design* is divided into *Temporal, Monetary,* and *Social Dark Patterns*, while *Maintenance* contains codes such as *Targeted Offers, Tiered Service and Compensation*. Due to the coding agenda incorporating all major contexts from the circuit of culture, coded segments within major and sub-codes include a variety of individuals (game professionals and users), groups (guilds, GGS, etc.), practices (habitual gameplay) and messages (in-game advertisements). While codes reveal a glimpse of the total population from the culture analyzed, or phenomena from certain contexts, what remains constant among all codes is that they take place at the level of practice. This means that all phenomena coded consist of specific customs, which were observed in process during the 18-month ethnography, or which were recounted to the researcher during interviews. Even when looking at messages, such as in-game advertisements, these are considered practices carried out by the company itself.

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                          │      Research Questions      │◄──────────────┐
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           ┌──────────────────────────┐     ┌──────────────────────────┐│
           │ Theoretical based        │     │ Review of data (25-50%)  ││
           │ definition of aspects:   │────►│ based on theoretical     ││
           │ main and sub categories. │     │ grounding                ││
           └──────────────────────────┘     └──────────────────────────┘│
                                                       │                 │
                                            ┌──────────────────────────┐ │
                                            │ Pinpointing definitions  │ │
                                            │ and selection criteria   │ │
                                            │ for inductive categories.│ │
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   ┌──────────────────────────────┐        ┌──────────────────────────┐ │
   │ Collection of inductive and  │        │ Formulating inductive    │ │
   │ deductive codes into a       │        │ categories based on      │ │
   │ cohesive coding agenda.      │◄───────│ review of material (20-  │ │
   │ Theoretically based          │        │ 50%) and merging         │ │
   │ formulations of coding rules │        │ possibly overlapping     │ │
   │ and examples.                │        │ codes.                   │ │
   └──────────────────────────────┘        └──────────────────────────┘ │
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   ┌──────────────────────────────┐                                     │
   │ Pre-test of coding agenda     │                                    │
   │ through application to         │                                   │
   │ approximately 20-50% of       │                                    │
   │ material.                     │                                    │
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   │ Final revision of coding       │                                   │
   │ agenda: removing irrelevant   │                                    │
   │ codes and rethinking or        │                                   │
   │ merging constantly overlapping│                                     │
   │ codes.                        │                                    │
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       │ Coding  material/data│       │ Interpretation of results    │──┘
       │ completely           │──────►│ based on systematizing and   │
       └──────────────────────┘       │ theming coded segments       │
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                                       │ Contextualizing based on     │
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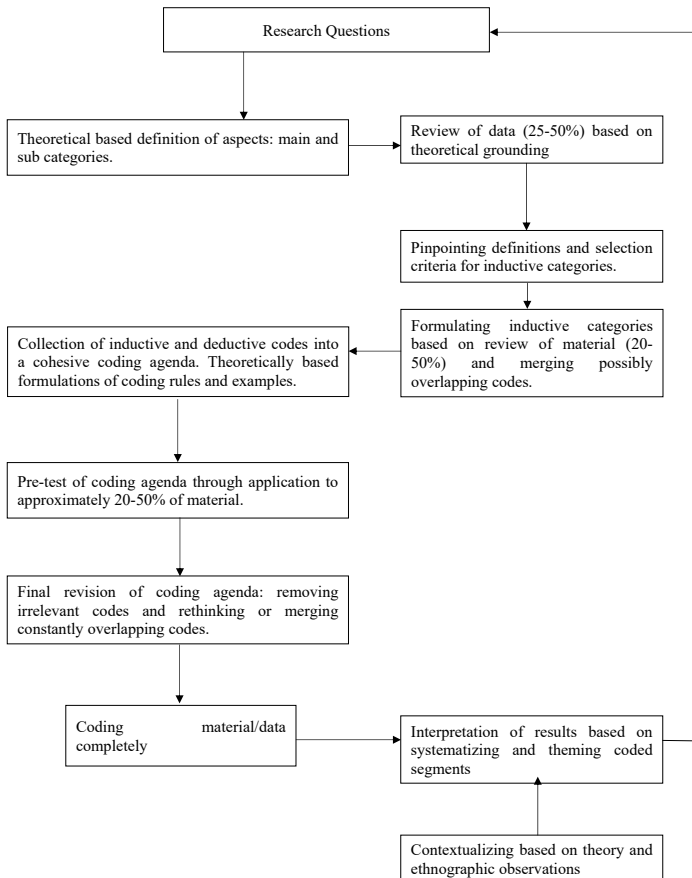
Figure 5: Data analysis process used in this research, combining aspects of Mayring's (2000) qualitative content analysis and Boellstorff et al.'s (2012) ethnography of virtual worlds.

Once the coding agenda has been finalized, analysis of the data begins. Participant observation was handled first, followed by interview data, and finally archived news and posts. At certain points, when handling transcripts, the researcher referred back to participant observation data, to further contextualize the interview. Analysis of data continued until satisfactory answers to the research question had been reached (Mayring, 2000), and when new themes or patterns no longer arose (Boellstorff et al., 2012). The first stage of data analysis utilized the coding agenda to separate and categorize phenomena, summarizing the amount of data to be analyzed. For example, quotations and observations that deal with game usage by individuals are coded within appropriation

and its sub-codes, such as when users discuss how frequently they play the game or with whom. Other data, dealing with the development and maintenance of the game, is coded under (re)production and its respective sub-codes. This stage resulted in a total of *1931* coded segments from all three data types: fieldnotes, interviews and articles. These codes were then refined into themes in a secondary round of coding to assist in answering the RQs.

As a detailed illustration of this type of coding, we can utilize the sub-code *Temporal Dark Patterns*, under the main code of *(re)production*, which deals with development and maintenance aspects of the game. When using this code, segments within interviews or fieldnotes were coded concerning game mechanics and the aspects of the game that were protracted (long waiting times, excessive repetition, etc.) and that players were encouraged to spend money to alleviate the effects of. For instance, during the early stage of the 18-month ethnography, the long queue times for troop recruitment first noted by the researcher were coded under this sub-code. Additionally, any time players complained in alliance chat about the time it took to recruit troops, or build/upgrade certain structures, this was also coded under the *Temporal Dark Patterns* sub-code. To better illustrate the coding of practices that deal with social aspects, we can utilize the sub-code of *Social Obligations*, under the main code of *Appropriation*. Using this code, segments in interviews or field notes were coded concerning observations or statements made about any social commitments that might influence individuals' gameplay. For example, during interviews, when participants stated that they stopped playing the game at certain times to take care of their children or significant others, it was coded under this sub-code, e.g. "I don't let it interfere with my real life such as work or my family. So, I try to schedule in around it," (6eyes, personal communication, January, 2017). Similarly, when users stated that they were "afk" (away from keyboard), taking care of similar family or community responsibilities in the game alliance chat, it was also coded as such.

A secondary round of coding then took place to find specific patterns within each code, and relationships between the coded phenomena. The method for the secondary round of coding is borrowed from the ethnography of virtual worlds approach suggested by Boellstorff et al. (2012). Here, coding segments are systemized and thematized (ibid) to provide suitable answers to the research questions proposed. Thematization translates the codes from a sub-code into relatable findings by detecting precise patterns within the segments coded. A succinct example of this is the *VIP and Data Driven Design* sub-theme, under the *Culture Commercialization through Maintenance* theme (*[re]production context*). Here, the only code utilized for this sub-theme is *user opinions*; however, patterns arising within coded segments indicate that the only user opinions that mattered to Goodgame Studios were those of the VIPs (high paying users), with

those who do not pay being largely ignored. This marks the culmination of this particular theme.

To better illustrate the thematization and systemization process, two example themes from separate cultural contexts (and the codes which compose them) are exhibited. The first is *Commercialization through Maintenance,* from the (*re*)*production* context, while the second is *Personal Gamer Identity*, from the *Identification* context. The first theme from the (re)production context is a main theme, which means that from Commercialization through to Maintenance there exist sub-themes (*Tiered Offers or Sniper Marketing*, *Segregation in Customer Service*, etc.). These effectively function as systematized groupings of various codes within this cultural context, which make thematic sense. For instance, *Tiered offers or Sniper Marketing* group codes dealt with the practice of targeting users with specific offers, as well as providing them with unique packages based on their account balance (light/heavy/non-pay user). *Segregation in Customer Service*, on the other hand, is a sub-theme which grouped codes concerning game maintenance practices, and revolved around compensating users' missing digital goods, where the quality of customer service provided was contingent upon the payment status of the users.

Likewise, the *Personal Gamer Identity* is a main theme under which several sub-themes exist that group codes into systematized detailed observations. Sub-themes such as *Gamer Identity, Ownership and Attachment to Virtual Property*; *Gamer Identity and Payment*; or *Employee Identity and Company Values* all deal with separate themes. Nevertheless, they also group some of the same codes. All these sub-themes deal with the concept of 'gamer identity,' hence codes from the agenda which relate to classifying this phenomenon (e.g. self-identification, community involvement, game and media preference, non-gamer qualities) are part of each of these sub-themes. However, each sub-theme still includes its own unique set of codes dealing with distinct practices. *Gamer Identity and Payment* includes codes which deal with *Gamer Identity Negotiation with Pay Status*, among others; while *Employee Identity and Company Values* includes the code *Gamer Identity Negation with Company Actions and Values*, as well as others. In addition to grouping similar codes, themes and sub-themes also serve to showcase specific patterns within coded segments, which are only detected in this round of analysis. The examples stated here are just a few themes and sub-themes. For a full list of these themes from RQ1, and their respective codes, please refer to Table 9 in Chapter 5.0.

This thematization and systemization stage is considered the major part of data analysis. However, interpretation of coded segments is not restricted to this stage alone and can also occur during the writing process, in keeping with the non-linear analysis approach of virtual ethnography (Boellstorff et al., 2012). In addition to answering the stat-

ed research questions, analyzed data was also used to connect our case study to general issues and a larger social context (ibid.; Alasuutari, 1997), primarily comparing the culture of Empire to other F2P or pay-to-play games.

To answer RQ1 (and its sub-research questions), or *how the F2P model transforms the various contexts of Empire game culture,* codes from each respective context have been used to answer their counterpart sub-RQ. For example, deductive codes dealing with dark patterns, and inductive ones dealing with the maintenance of the game, are used to answer sub-RQ: *how the F2P model transforms the (re)production context of game culture*. Dark patterns, the players' responses and reactions to these actions, and the contexts in which the patterns themselves arose, were all used to answer the research question. Due to the contextual coding of phenomena, not only were occurrences of dark patterns coded, but so was how they were used, how they can be avoided, and how they build on each other. This all aided in the increased commercialization of Empire's game culture through gameplay design. In some cases, codes outside of a sub-RQ's context were used to help answer the research question. This was also the case with some practices in the appropriation context, detailing social relationships in the game, where some codes from the identification context (pay status) were used to assist in answering the questions of how, and why, individuals form relationships in the game[7]. For a more detailed overview of which codes were used to answer which sub-RQs, please refer to the Code-RQ matrix at the end of this chapter (Table 8), which displays this data in a simplified form, emphasizing which codes were used in answering each respective sub-RQ. Alternatively, for an overview of themes which arose from each respective context, and how this led to answering each sub-RQ in RQ1, please refer to Table 9 in Chapter 5.0.

To answer RQ2, or *how the various contexts of F2P transform each other*, codes across each context were made use of. Due to contextual coding, some transformations are coded as part of the phenomena examined from each context. For example, when coding phenomena under the context of representation, or more specifically how the image of the game (and company) are perceived negatively in public discourse and the mainstream press, codes which helped the researcher come to this conclusion also highlighted a transformation from other contexts which led to this negative image, such as questionable development and customer service tactics ([re]production context) which helped build the negative reputation. While these contexts were all coded as separate practices (questionable development and maintenance tactics in [re]production and a negative image in representation), due to the qualitative nature of the coding process, the relationship between these contexts can be inferred from interviewee statements noted during the secondary coding phase, which were then analyzed and rationalized.

This is quite typical when using the circuit of culture, as the process or contexts of the circuit "need not follow in succession" and "[a]ny process may interrelate with any other, depending upon cultural circumstances," (Champ and Brock, 2010, p. 577). Each specific contextual relationship was coded using an assembly of codes across all contexts. An example of each type of relationship, which is further expanded upon in Chapter 5.0, is given below in Table 7. For a more general overview, Table 8 at the end of the chapter shows which general codes were used to answer RQ2 overall.

The contextual coding that occurred also helps to emphasize in which direction the transformations take place (whether single or multidirectional). Using the example of the game's negative image in mainstream media again, this can be considered a single directional transformation in practice, because the questionable (re)production tactics can modify the game's image, while the game's image in mainstream media did little to alter development and customer service tactics during the course of the 18-month ethnography. For more on single and multidirectional contextual relationships, please refer to RQ2 (see 5.7). The overall process of coding relationships was assisted by the use of the MAXQDA code relationships browser, which uses visual analysis to display a grid of intersecting codes, allowing the researcher to detect which codes overlap most frequently, and narrowing down possible connections.

In a sense, when answering RQ2, these relationships function as themes do in RQ1, under which codes can be grouped, making them the second step in analysis. These *relationships* are a collection of *interactions* between the multiple contexts, or their subphenomena, noting the transformations that occur between each individual context or practice.

Finally, it is important to note that in order to observe the transformation process, whether in the first or second research question, statements of interview participants are used in a way which compares cultural practices from Empire's community over time. Player or professionals, for example, will state that production practices have changed since the inception of the game, or that their gameplay habits have developed a certain rhythm over time, indicating the transformative process of the payment model. Additionally, statements from participants comparing cultural practices to game communities with traditional payment models are also used, since this also indicates a transformation process from the state of game culture before using microtransactions. Alternatively, some temporal transformations in Empire's game culture are also observable through analyzing forum posts and news sources that indicate changes in the game or company's business approach. This archival information is especially beneficial in answering RQ2, as it assists in theoretically explaining the outcome of certain relationships. For example, how certain production practices can hurt emotional appeal (Carroll, 2011) in public discourse.

Table 7: Summary of codes utilized in explaining each contextual transformation relationship.

Relationship	Sub-codes Utilized
Two-context, single directional relationship between (re)production and representation (Fig. 7)	Temporal/monetary dark patterns, antisocial behavior mechanics, psychological tricks, tiered service/offers; as well as unofficial representation of game/company and official representation of game/company.
Two-context, single directional relationship between regulation and representation (Fig. 8)	Compensation, tiered service/offers and differences in user management; as well as unofficial representation of game/company and official representation of game/company.
Two-context, single directional relationship between (re)production and appropriation (Fig. 9)	Tiered service/offers, targeted offers, antisocial behavior mechanics, psychological trickery, temporal/monetary dark patterns; as well as social rules, spending and play experience, and budgeting currency.
Two-context, bidirectional relationship between spending habits and gamer identity (Fig. 10)	Spending and play experience, self-assessment of financial investment; as well as gamer identity, self-identification (gaming usage) and gaming identity negotiations with pay status.
Two-context, bidirectional relationship between virtual aspect value and player investments (Fig. 11)	Self-assessment of financial/temporal investment; as well as gamer identity, self-identification (gaming usage) and gaming identity negotiations with value of virtual goods.
Three-context, single directional relationship between questionable production matters, player and employee identities and representation of the game and company. (Fig. 12)	Temporal/monetary dark patterns, antisocial behavior mechanics, psychological tricks, tiered service/offers, differences in user management, gamer identity, self-identification (gaming usage), gaming identity negotiations with pay status, gaming identity negotiations with company actions/values; as well as unofficial representation of game/company and official representation of game/company.
Three-context, multidirectional relationship between group identification, social play and antisocial behavior mechanics (Fig. 13)	Antisocial behavior mechanics, psychological tricks, play as social interaction, as well as group identification.
Four-context relationship between questionable development practices, employee identities, in-game regulation and representation in public discourse (Fig. 14)	Temporal/monetary dark patterns, antisocial behavior mechanics, psychological tricks, tiered service/offers, differences in user management, gamer identity, self-identification (gaming usage), gaming identity negotiations with company actions/values; as well as unofficial representation of game/company and official representation of game/company.
Four-context relationship highlighting a multidirectional transformation between appropriation and three respective contexts of identification, production and regulation (Fig. 15)	Tiered services/offers, targeted offers, compensation, differences in user management, official game rules, cooperative regulation, real world mirroring, social rules, group identification and community identification.
Contextual relationship between all five contexts of Empire's game culture. (Fig. 16)	Temporal/monetary dark patterns, antisocial behavior mechanics, psychological tricks, tiered services/offers, targeted offers, compensation, differences in user management, official game rules, group identification, community identification, value of virtual goods, motivations for play, play as social interaction; as well as unofficial representation of game/company and official representation of game/company.

While findings from qualitative and ethnographic data might not be completely general-izable (Boellstorff et al., 2012), their main strength is the way in which they contribute through comparison (ibid), by noting specifics in our case and how they differ from oth-ers. Finally, by making moderate claims (Payne and Williams, 2005), as well as utilizing the hourglass model (Alasuutari, 1996), which relates the case to broader theoretical knowledge and literature, this case study will have more generalizable data that is ap-plicable to a number of other F2P game cultures, and which is comparable to quantita-tive data (ibid).

Through the hourglass model (Alasuutari, 1996) and utilizing the Elmezeny & Wimmer (2018) framework for defining game cultures, this research additionally hopes to find commonalities, differences, and shared characteristics of free-to-play games, distin-guishing a possible free-to-play game culture on the meso level. The research should also show how this supposed culture is embedded in the overall macro game culture.

Table 8: Code-RQ Matrix displaying which codes from the agenda were applied to answer each research or sub-research question.

Code	RQ1.1	RQ1.2	RQ1.3	RQ1.4	RQ1.5	RQ2
1.0 Production						
1.1 Design	x					
1.1.1 Temporal Dark Patterns	x					x
1.1.2 Monetary Dark Patterns	x					x
1.1.3 Social Capital Dark Patterns		x				
1.1.4 Antisocial Behavior Mechanics	x			x		x
1.1.5 Psychological Tricks	x				x	x
1.2 Maintenance	x					
1.2.1 Targeted Offers	x					x
1.2.2 Tiered Service/Offers	x			x		x
1.2.3 Compensation	x					x
1.2.4 Real-World Tie-in		x				
1.2.5 User Opinions	x					
1.2.6 Content Value			x			
1.3 User Generated Content						
2.0 Appropriation		x				
2.1 Social Relationships						
2.1.1 Play as Social Interaction		x	x			x
2.1.2 Social Rules		x				x
2.1.3 Social Leverage		x	x			
2.1.4 Teaching as Play						
2.2 Daily Routines		x				
2.2.1 Types of Daily Integration		x				
2.3 Thoughts and Emotions						
2.3.1 Play and Stress		x		x		
2.3.2 Game Content and Stress						
2.4 Commitments and Obligations		x				
2.4.1 Budgeting Currency		x				x
2.4.2 Budgeting Time		x				
2.4.3 Social Obligations		x				
2.5 Self-Assessment		x				
2.5.1 Of Financial Investment		x				x
2.5.2 Of Time Investment		x				x
2.6 Spill-In		x				
2.6.1 Motivations for Play		x				x
2.6.2 Real World Mirroring		x				x
2.7 Real Investments		x				
2.7.1 Spending and Play Experience		x				x
2.7.2 Spending Habits		x	x			x
2.7.3 Non-monetary Price of Play		x				
2.8 Turning Points						
3.0 Identification			x			
3.1 Gamer Identity			x			x
3.1.1 Self Identification			x			x
3.1.2 Gaming Usage (Habitual)			x			
3.1.3 Community Involvement			x			
3.1.4 Game Paraphernalia						
3.1.5 Game and Media Preferences			x			
3.1.6 Non-Gamer Qualities			x			
3.2 Gamer Identity Negotiation			x			
3.2.1 Value of Virtual Goods			x			x
3.2.2 Pay Status		x	x			x
3.2.3 Company Actions/Values			x			x

3.3 Player Identification					
3.3.1 Avatar/Character Identification					
3.3.2 Group Identification			X			X
3.3.3 Community Identification			X			X
3.3.4 Game Involvement (immersion)			X			
4.0 Regulation				X		
4.1 Company Regulation				X		
4.1.1 Official Game rules				X		X
4.1.2 Board/Communication Rules				X		
4.1.3 Differences in User Management				X		X
4.2 Industry Regulation						
4.2.1 Platform Regulation						
4.3 Self-Regulation		X				
4.3.1 Personal (Individual) Regulation		X				
4.3.2 Cooperative Regulation				X		X
5.0 Representation					X	
5.1 Unofficial					X	
5.1.1 Of Game					X	X
5.1.2 Of Company					X	X
5.2 Official					X	
5.2.1 Representing Value					X	
5.2.2 Representing Players					X	
5.2.3 Representing Content					X	
5.2.4 Representing Game					X	X
5.2.5 Representing Company					X	X

5.0   The Free-to-Play Model and Transformations of Culture

This chapter details the findings of the study by addressing the first research question, *or how the F2P business model transforms each context of Empire's culture*. These findings might appear to be overly descriptive or detailed, however this is customary of ethnographic research and shouldn't necessarily be regarded as negative: descriptive observations of culture, as is typical in ethnographies, provide several benefits.

Descriptive results deliver detailed observations of the numerous cultural practices of individuals, groups (guilds, alliance, etc.) and organizations (GGS) within the sample. Accounts of these practices are not possible using quantitative methods, and the requisite level of detail is not provided by other analytical qualitative methods that focus on the examination of texts alone, such as content or discourse analysis. Furthermore, through these comprehensive findings, one is able to provide ample context, offering information that explains the background and social implications of these observed cultural practices. Finally, the descriptive nature of these findings means that examples are often given from the data analyzed, supporting theoretical claims made in this research question, as well as in RQ2. By providing plentiful examples, one is able to illustrate the individual nature of the practices observed in the sample, even when frequently coded.

It is important to indicate the sources of data in the following chapters. Interviews are directly quoted in the text, as well as information from archival sources (articles, forums, etc.) and cited as such. In-game practices and conversations, however, are incorporated in the form of images. While this is highly beneficial for presenting in-game practices, it is done for in-game conversations due to the technical limitations of Empire not allowing players to export text from in-game chat. Nevertheless, screenshots of in-game conversations allow for more contextual information to be displayed.

Under each context, the findings for RQ1 are organized in a number of themes and sub-themes. As mentioned in the Methodology chapter (see Subchapter 4.8), the themes and sub-themes appeared during the second step of data analysis (thematizing and systemizing), and are considered a successive step of analysis, after the initial coding process. For a full list of themes in RQ1, and their sub-themes, please refer to Table 9 below. The final number of themes presented here is based on two specific considerations. Firstly, they serve as a summarization of the various important codes from the agenda that were most prominently coded and observed during the 18-month ethnography. Secondly, these are the themes that deal specifically with cultural practices (highlighted by both theory and empirical work in this study), which might experience a transformation due to the involvement of the F2P business model.

The use (and nature) of themes and sub-themes in this study is somewhat twofold. As mentioned earlier in the Methodology chapter (see Subchapter 4.8.), themes serve to organize codes, and their sub-codes, by grouping them together into comprehensible topics relevant to the research question at hand. Example themes stated earlier include *Personal Gamer Identity*, which grouped codes dealing with gamer identity (self-identification, non-gamer qualities, game and media preferences, etc.). This theme was further divided into sub-themes, which handled other practices being negotiated through this gamer identity (e.g. *Gamer Identity, Ownership and Attachment to Virtual Property*; or *Gamer Identity and Payment*).

On the other hand, sub-themes are also used to organize data extracted from single codes. Using surveyed theory and research interests, coded segments that come under a specific sub-code undergo a systemization in the second step of analysis (see Sub-chapter 4.8.) where patterns among them are distinguished; should any be found, they are fitted together into similar sub-themes. A perfect example of this sort of analysis is the sub-theme *VIP and Data Driven Design*, where coded segments under the sub-code User Opinions, from the context of (re)production, were analyzed. Based on contextual coding, research interests, surveyed literature, and other codes (e.g. differences in user management) the final sub-theme was discerned.

All the codes used in the agenda are based on surveyed literature, or observations made from the sample itself. However, literature used in the secondary stage of data analysis, which was used to help interpret themes and relationships later on (see RQ2 below), is not part of the coding agenda. It is still thoroughly grounded in the essential theoretical framework of the study, and can be found in Chapter 2.0. For example, lit-erature on data driven game design, which is used to interpret the theme, is part of sur-veyed literature on F2P games (Nieborg, 2015; Paavilainen et al., 2016). However, the code on user opinions is an inductive code achieved from interview insights. Table 9 highlights the main themes that fall under each context (e.g. *Culture Commercialization through Design*, or *Play and Purchasing*), all of which serve as systemizations and groupings of coded segments from the coding agenda, dealing with this specific context and related phenomena or practices. Sub-themes, on the other hand, deal with more precise cultural practices, which sometimes require literature from different contexts of the circuit of culture for their interpretation.

Furthermore, as stated in the RQ chapter, each context observes cultural practices on a certain level (micro/meso/macro). For example, when looking at the re(production) con-text, cultural practices are observed on the micro level, for reproduction of official con-tent by individuals, as well as the meso level, for production of official content by the company itself (an organization). Hence, these themes and sub-themes also work by grouping practices of actors from multiple levels, when applicable, and relating their ac-

tions to each other. For example, when looking at the context of identification, the theme of *personal gamer identity* groups codes such as *gamer identity*, which is a micro level identification practice, and *company actions and values*, which is a meso level practice dealing with organizational image. In doing so, we are able to observe how meso level identification practices (that of the company) relate to micro level practices, those of individuals. Hence, while each research question might observe cultural practices for each context on multiple levels, this is not done exclusively, and through the use of themes and sub-themes, these levels are related to each other.

As previously stated, findings that fall under the first research question are initially grouped within the specific cultural context of the Empire game culture, starting with (re)production, and moving on to regulation, identification, appropriation, and finally representation. This is not the original order of sub-research questions; it is only the golden thread of this chapter, which developed from noting various practices during participant observation. By addressing each context separately and empirically observing the cultural practices within, the research addresses previous criticism of the circuit of culture framework (Wittmann, 2007), that it is never applied in its entirety on an empirical level. The relationship between these contexts is then addressed in RQ2.

Table 9: Themes and subthemes presented in RQ1 divided by context.

Context	Theme/Sub-Theme	Corresponding Codes
(re)production	**1. Culture Commercialization Through Design**	
	1.1 Abuse of Dark Patterns	Temporal Dark Patterns & Monetary Dark Patterns.
	1.2 Mental Trickery and Antisocial Environment	Antisocial Behavior Mechanics & Psychological Tricks
	2. Culture Commercialization Through Maintenance	
	2.1 Tiered Offers or Sniper Marketing	Targeted Offers & Tiered Service/Offers
	2.2 Discrimination in Customer Service	Tiered Service/Offers & Compensation
	2.3 VIP and Data Driven Design	User Opinions
Regulation	**1. Law Enforcement not Maintenance**	
	1.1 Dividing the Community Through Official Rule	Tiered Service/Offers, Official Game Rules & Differences in User Management
	1.2 Friendliness, Fairness and the Class Divide	Antisocial Behavior Mechanics, Tiered Service/Offers & Differences in User Management.
	2. Cooperative Regulation	
	2.1 Fairplay Rules for a Pleasant Experience (and less Consumerism)	Official Game Rules, Cooperative Regulation & Antisocial Behavior Mechanics
	2.2 Control Through Fairplay	Official Game Rules, Cooperative Regulation & Game Content and Stress
Identification	**1. Personal Gamer Identity**	
	1.1 Gamer Identity, Ownership and Attachment to Virtual Property	Gamer Identity *(includes: Self-identification, Gaming Usage, Community Involvement, Game and Media Preferences, Non-Gamer Qualities)*, Spending Habits, Content Value & Value of Digital Goods
	1.2 Gamer Identity and Payment	Gamer Identity, Spending Habits, Pay Status,
	1.3 Employee Identity and Company Values	Gamer Identity & Company Actions/Values
	1.4 Gamer Identity and Company Values	Gamer Identity & Company Actions/Values
	2. Identifying with Clans and Community	
	2.1 Playing with Payment Classes: Group Identification in Empire	Group Identification, Pay Status, Social Leverage & Spending Habits
	2.2 Acquaintances with Benefits	Group Identification, Play as Social Interaction & Social Leverage
	2.3 Fragmented but Whole: Empire Community Identification	Company Actions/Values, Community Identification, Pay Status & Game Involvement (immersion)

Appropriation	1. Play and Purchasing	
	1.1 Spending Practices and Habits	Spending Habits, Spending and Play Experience, Real World Mirroring & Self-Assessment of Financial Investment
	1.2 Budgeting and Self-Assessment	Budgeting Currency, Self-Assessment of Financial Investment, Motivations for Play & Self-Assessment of Time Investment
	1.3 Spending and Play Experience	Spending and Play Experience & Pay Status
	2. Daily Integration and Challenges	Types of Daily Integration & Play and Stress
	2.1 Like Work but not Just Quite: Prioritizing Other Obligations	Types of Daily Integration, Social Obligations, Play and Stress & Real-World Mirroring
	3. Socializing in Empire	
	3.1 Rewarding Socialization and Socializing as Play	Social Capital Dark Patterns, Play as Social Interaction, Group Identification & Motivations for Play
	3.2 Commonalities and Friends in High Places: Relations for Leverage	Group Identification, Social Leverage, Play as Social Interaction & Differences in User Management
	3.3 We don't Do That Here: Social Rules in Empire	Board/Communication Rules, Social Rules & Cooperative Regulation
	4. Clashing of Realities: Transfer Processes in Empire	
	4.1 It's all too Real: Mirroring the Real-World in Empire	Real World Mirroring, Real-World Tie-In, Group Identification & Pay Status
	4.2 It's Just You in Pixels: Transferring Motivations in Empire	Real World Mirroring, Community Identification & Motivations for Play
Representation	**1. Aspect Depiction in Empire**	
	1.1 (Fake) Ads and Marketing: Commercialized Representation in Empire	Representing Content, Representing Value & Psychological Tricks.
	1.2 Spend Big to Win Big: Player Glorification and Price Justification	Representing Players, Representing Value & Board/Communication Rules
	2. Empire in Media and Public Discourse	
	2.1 Image Improvement Efforts: Goodgame's Official Communication	Representing Game, Representing Company, Gamer Identity, & Company Actions/Values
	2.2 A Persistently Negative Image: Unofficial Communication of GGS and Empire	Unofficial Representation of Game, Unofficial Representation of Company, User Opinions & Difference in User Management

5.1   (re)production

The most observable transformation of the free-to-play model on the (re)production context of game culture can be subsumed under the metaprocess of commercialization, or the excessive interest and focus on maximizing profit at any cost. In the case of Empire, this can be seen mostly embedded in both aspects of game design, and game services or maintenance. Throughout the following section, we will discuss the excessive commercialization of Empire, and presumably similar F2P games, by observing specific design and maintenance-related practices that are occurring more frequently due to the F2P model.

5.1.1. Culture Commercialization Through Design

Looking specifically at the design of Empire, one particular concept, dark game design patterns, which is frequently misused, tends to hamper the quality of the game and present an apparently over-commercialized product. Dark game design patterns are intentionally used to cause negative experiences for the player (Zagal et al., 2013) and more often than not this is utilized to incentivize spending through microtransactions. When done within certain limits this can be acceptable, however when abused, these patterns can present an overly commercialized product that exploits an individual's lack of patience and need for instant gratification. The following section details instances of dark design pattern (Zagal et al., 2013) abuses in Empire, as well other misuses of game design, or exploitations of the player's cognitive biases and irrational behaviors (psychological trickery), in hopes of generating more profit, leading to a more commercialized culture overall[8].

5.1.1.1.   Abuse of Dark Patterns

Temporal Dark Patterns are quite common in F2P games and are in essence what makes a player keep returning to the game. This is especially true of features such as excessive grinding or 'playing by appointment' where certain tasks can only be completed during specific times. However, in Empire, certain features abuse the 'playing by appointment' mechanic to unbearable degrees. One example is the key feature of troop recruitment. Troops play a central role in both the launching of attacks and defending of the user's castle. The recruitment of troops is done through the barracks, and the user is limited to only one barracks building per castle. The barracks themselves only allow two recruitment slots, each permitting the user to recruit a maximum of 5 troops per slot. This was changed to a maximum of 80 in later updates after the ethnography was completed; still, only 5 can be recruited at a time, even though 80 can be queued. Of course, a user had the option of renting three more recruitment slots for a week, each

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[8] See commercialization as defined by Krotz (2007) in Subchapter 2.2.1.

for a real money microtransaction that would allow them to queue more troops. However, should the user opt not to do this, they would have to login every 30 minutes to queue more troops and ensure a steady supply of men for their army. While this feature might have been fixed in later updates, the fact that Empire is a game centered on warfare means that having such a game mechanic abused, and only slightly bypassed through payment, is a sign of aggressive monetization. This is further worsened by the fact that the company also sends attacks by NPCs to regularly destroy the players' troops, prompting them to recruit more:

> I think the saddest thing about it is […] we run with this system where you have to recruit troops and so […] if they die, they're all done. They're gone until you make new ones. You have to make them fresh and we send systematic attacks from the CPUs to users and at one point […] cause obviously I don't play hardcore, I don't recruit all the time and so on, but I had a little army and I was like, "hey I'm gonna use it, why not" and then a CPU attacked me and I lost everything and then it takes 7 or 8 hours to rebuild everything that you had and I was like "no, screw this, not gonna bother." (Arcanine, May, 2016)

Furthermore, almost all other time-based features in-game, or temporal dark patterns, can simply be bypassed through payment. This is what is known as 'pay to skip', or a monetary dark pattern (Zagal et al., 2013). While this can be a clever business strategy when utilized well, having it applied to almost all features, aggressively monetizes the games, and ruins the experience for those without enough money to pay. Professionals interviewed from GGS confirm that it affects the gaming environment when almost all features can be skipped, from troop recruitment, to building construction and then re-construction after attacks:

> It's super boring if you have to wait for everything to construct, for everything to repair after an attack. It takes weeks, if not months to build up again…so if you're not spending rubies [premium currency], it's just super long and super boring. In real time… a lot of players play during work, but it takes *so* much time, it does take out the fun. You've already lost interest in the war by the time you build up your attackers again and reconstructed all your burnt farmhouses. (Lara, May, 2016)

Another essentially negative monetary dark pattern is what is colloquially known as 'pay-to-win' or essentially being able to buy your way to the top of the community or leaderboards. Again, when utilized correctly, this can be a useful monetization strategy that can benefit any F2P game, where players are able to buy functional items that do not offset the balance of the game too much. However, in the case of Empire, players are able to outright "buy their way to the top", and no amount of skill, time or effort put into the game can match the money invested. It has become so extreme that those with enough money are unstoppable:

> It reaches a point where it's a bit silly…we've started making sets that people can
> buy outright that can't be beaten in defense. The way the game is built right now,
> they can't be beaten. They basically destroy any defensive troop that anyone would
> have because we don't have enough in the game. We don't have enough high-level
> defensive equipment or troops in the game for it to be counted. So, it reaches a
> point now where people basically surrender almost before the attack hits. There's a
> feature called open gates, which means that they don't lose any troops or anything
> and the battle is just like a placeholder battle, so they get attacked, their buildings
> get destroyed and their stuff is stolen but no actual battle takes place and that's be-
> come so common that no one wants to attack each other anymore. Because it's like
> if this guy's attacking me I know he's got the best stuff in the game, there's no point
> even in playing it out…because we've pushed the balance (Arcanine, May, 2016)

There are examples of certain design elements, or events, in Empire that display how
monetary and temporal dark patterns build off of, and assist, each other, demonstrating
the abuse of these patterns even further. One such example is the 'architect' event. This
event is a rare occurrence that appears in the game and allows players to upgrade spe-
cific buildings beyond a certain level. Once some buildings reach their level cap they
can only be upgraded by the architect, and to do so he requires a significant amount of
resources (wood, stone and gold). While this might seem illustrative of a simple 'playing
by appointment' pattern, it is certainly an abuse of the pattern, because players never
know the schedule of the event. The timing of the event is only known to staff, and there
is no fixed schedule for it which players are able to predict and prepare for. Further-
more, more temporal dark patterns are implemented in the event, because an excessive
amount of time is required to complete construction: approximately 40 or more hours for
one building. Players are only able to queue more than one upgrade if they've pur-
chased a construction crane with premium currency (building on another monetary dark
pattern). Finally, the event also expects users to have enough resources at hand to
manage all their upgrades, which is not possible with the available storage in their cas-
tle, meaning that they have to either have help from their friends or purchase extra re-
sources with premium currency. Hence, players who do not make regular
microtransactions are resigned to upgrading one or two buildings at a time and are left
lagging behind those who spend plenty of money on the game, signifying how game
content and development is primarily profit-oriented and not community focused.

Image 1: Guild chat complaining about irregular schedule of architect event.

5.1.1.2.   *Mental Trickery and an Antisocial Environment*

Empire, similar to other F2P games, exploits psychological tricks such as artificial scarcity (Zagal et al. 2013) to push players into completing microtransactions. One common example in many F2P games is the rate of progression. Several games have quick progression where users initially feel gratified because of their achievements, and success in tasks, but as they advance through the earlier stages they start to find that progress becomes slower, and if they would like to continue at the same rate, or have the same sense of achievement, they have to make some form of payment. This quandary is aptly summarized by one GGS employee:

> I think those Free-to-Play they're like, usually, very addicting [sic]. Usually you start
> with ok it's free, I'm gonna start playing it but then you like it or something and I think
> it's human nature that you want to have this steady progression and usually game
> [sic] is more like designed that there is this early part with lots of achievements, lots
> of missions but then it's slowly getting slower and that's a catch because then you
> know how it was nice in the beginning levels, you had everything, it was easy to win
> and suddenly there is this slowdown and you either progress slower or you start
> paying for like super offer [sic] that gives you a one-time deal that will boost you fur-
> ther and you still have this feeling of constant progression. (Gul'dan, May, 2016)

Some examples of psychological tricks specific to Empire, however, include items that are purchasable for premium currency (real money) and claim to provide functional benefits without appearing to provide any. Some of these items provide such a negligible functional benefit that doing without them is better. These include drill grounds that are supposedly meant to improve recruitment speed, but only take up space in the castle lot instead. Another example of psychological trickery is so-called 'legendary' levels.

> Originally, the level cap was once thought to be 70. However, once players started
> reaching level 70, they began to realize (to the disappointment of many) that there
> are levels extending beyond that. These continue indefinitely, reach into the hun-
> dreds, and they are known as legendary levels. One final example, and one entirely
> specific to Empire, is the 'wheel of fortune' minigame. This is a minigame where you
> can use tickets to spin a wheel for prizes, but GGS employees state that the more
> times you spin, the better chance you have of actually winning superior prizes; this
> results in significant ticket investment from users who want decent prizes. While
> tickets can be won through in-game quests, they can also be purchased with real
> money. Hence, even this is another part of Empire "where we have this element of
> luck that can be completely controlled with money," (Arcanine, May, 2016).

Nevertheless, while psychological trickery is common in F2P games, and even includes some extreme offenses in this case example, what really communicates the aggressive monetization and commercialized nature of Empire is how these tricks are utilized to

promote antisocial behavior. While this might seem ordinary in a war-themed game, it is primarily used to encourage more spending and microtransactions, rather than to foster community interaction.

GGS accomplishes this through several in-game actions that fool players and foster an unstable environment that incites them to be constantly at war with each other. This is done through in-game events that encourage competitive attacking behavior, such as the 'alliance tournament', where alliances go to war with each other and the best is ranked at the top of the server, or the 'foreign lords' event, where the game mimics real player castles from other servers and launches attacks on players.

The company also constructs this antisocial environment through artificial scarcity and the lack of what is known as 'resource villages' (RVs). These are rare, coveted locations on the game map which players attempt to claim as their own; they are very desirable as they can supplement the resources of alliances immensely and serve as status symbols. GGS simply refuses to introduce more RVs into the game, propagating the artificial scarcity and creating an antisocial, war-time environment between players. This encourages players to engage in microtransactions to assist them in attacking and defending themselves from others, as they attempt to take control of these resource villages (in later updates, GGS facilitated the purchase of RVs, trading a hostile environment which promotes spending for direct microtransactions instead).

Since Empire is a war game, it does need to create a somewhat hostile environment, as aptly put by one GGS employee:

> It cannot be all peace because I think actually helps the game if you're in a non-friendly environment where you're only friends with your alliance and then everyone else is your enemy because you want to attack them, you want to make their castle burn. If you're just friends with everyone, are you going to send them resources all day?" (Zelda, May, 2016).

However, the question is where you draw the line. When should the in-game environment be deemed too hostile, and clearly operating as such just to encourage microtransactions? The rational answer would be when the company begins to take ethically questionable actions to trick players into attacking each other. One such example is when GGS sent out massive shadow attacks against multiple players to instigate a war. Shadow attacks are immensely expensive (premium/real world currency) attacks against castles, where the user is not able to distinguish who sent the attack. The player is therefore left with only a burned castle and endless suspicions as to where the attack could have come from. Lara, a GGS customer service employee, was faced with endless complaints from players when this occurred, as she recalls when recounting the event:

So, the company itself sent off an automated attack to get other players to retaliate to create a war on the server. So, there was 70 attacks at exactly the same time. So, players knew something was up because it's impossible. It's impossible for 70 attacks to happen at exactly the same time, it's just not possible and yeah that happened and it was 'shadow attacks' so you can't see who it was who attacked you and it also costs a lot more to send shadow attacks because you need shadow troops and shadow tools, which are a lot more expensive. So, each attack was worth a lot of rubies. It was insane. They just knew it wasn't possible, we had complaints about that the whole time. and we just had to say 'sorry you were attacked, sorry this happened, nothing to do with us.' We only found out about it the day after we had all the complaints and we asked the team saying 'Hey, what's going with these shadow attacks? What happened here?' and it was like "I don't know, what are you talking about?" and it's like "You know shadow attacks. There's been a mass attack, everyone on all these servers at the same time. What's happened?" they were "oh, I don't know" then it's like "Ok, our team may have done this without consulting anyone, to make more money" (Lara, May, 2016).

Such ethically questionable practices are becoming normalized in the industry, however, with Activision even patenting a matchmaking system that will examine player tendencies and ensure matchups that result in players making microtransactions (Alexandra, 2017).

Psychological trickery can also be utilized not only in the development of the game and fostering an antisocial environment, but also through providing certain services and the maintenance of the game itself.

[11:35]   ugh, totally wiped by a foreign lord. is it like weekly now?
[11:45]   r: I had full castle of vet composite bowmen and vet flame bearers
[11:45]   r: with an extra 200 sentinels draining my food and ruby tools in every slot
[11:45]   r: all gone
[11:45]   r: FLs are almost bi weekly now

Image 2: Players complaining about losses and the frequency of the Foreign Lords event. Ruby tools are tools purchased with premium currency, aka real money.

5.1.2. Culture Commercialization Through Maintenance

The term 'maintenance' denotes the various company actions involved in the upkeep of the game, aside from the development and publishing of content. This includes practices such as customer service, marketing to users, and collecting opinions on in-game matters. These actions are essential in maintaining online games, and are a reason why such games can essentially be considered services, not just products. Empire culture

appears heavily commercialized (profit-centric) from actions taken through its mainte-
nance practices, not just production practices.

5.1.2.1.   *Tiered Offers or Sniper Marketing*

Utilizing psychological trickery again, Empire targets its players with highly specific pur-
chasing offers for premium currency (rubies). These offers come through both in-game
and out of game channels, as well as through in-game pop-ups or emails. In-game they
overtake the entire screen and block gameplay until the player closes the window or
clicks on the offer, which then transfers them to the currency store. Sometimes the offer
also appears with a timer, further incentivizing a purchase. Occasionally the same timed
offer can appear without a timer, which has been proven to further increase purchasing
behavior in players, since most do not know how long the offer will be valid for (Lara,
May, 2016).

However, the real psychological trick comes from the way that GGS targets individuals
with these offers. Usually players will receive offers based on their purchasing patterns,
meaning that the offers they receive are tailored to them. Those who have yet to spend
any money will constantly be bombarded with attractive offers for premium currency and
bonuses, which others do not receive (these could include extra bonuses to the tune of
up to 300%). Once they've made a purchase, however, they are not likely to receive this
offer again, or a similar one. It is only once they have spent a significant amount of
money that they will then be provided with offers of great value again. Gul'dan, the Em-
pire game expert interviewed, clarifies the process:

> It's like this: It's this typical catch, if you don't pay you're getting great offers. So,
> they want you to pay. Then the offers are flattened so they're still good, they're ok
> but you have to pay a lot to get the best offers. So, it's like this U shape kinda thing,
> so they start with really good, then they're ok and if you're spending a lot they're re-
> ally good. And of course, the first time you pay, you go into the group of already paid
> but not so much, so you're not getting exceptional offers, so your friend who didn't
> pay yet will get better stuff. So, you know, you start with the good stuff, then it's
> okayish stuff and then if you pay enough you're like unlocking the best things.
> (Gul'dan, May, 2016).

If you do not pay (or play) for a long period, you will receive wildly generous offers that
are not accessible to players in the game at all. For example, if you do not log into the
game for an extended period of time, you will receive an email for a comeback offer
providing 500% bonuses, which is never offered in-game.

Hence, we can see GGS not only exploiting basic human instinct to maximize spending,
but we can also see them begin to segment the player base into groups, providing each
group with a different product or service. These groups receive the same product (or

service) for significantly different values, and sometimes the exact same price, based on their spending habits. This sort of trickery and segmentation lingers in other parts of Empire maintenance, most noticeably in customer services.

5.1.2.2.   Discrimination in Customer Services

GGS continues the division of players into separate groups in their customer service operations and complaint ticketing system. This occurs by dividing players into several categories, based on how much they have paid into their account so far. The GGS ticketing system displays non-payment users as gray (the lowest class), minor payment users as green (second lowest), average payment users as blue (mid-level), heavy payment users as purple (labeled as whales) and highest payment users as orange (also labeled as VIPs), which are the highest priority. The tickets the users submit are ranked through an internal system and displayed to customer service representatives based on the user's category, meaning that users with a higher status will appear further up in the queue to a CS representative than lower status users (orange, purple, blue, green, gray). While this priority system is logical from a business perspective, other customer service policies enforced exhibit how this community segregation is indicative of the Empire's profit-centric approach, and the lack of interest in fostering a player-friendly community.

The quality of customer service provided for user groups varies drastically and is reflective of Empire's commercialized environment. The reason for it taking longer to answer the customer service complaints of lower-paying user groups can be attributed to the priority system, which is itself based on company policy that you answer queries starting with the highest paying users, while the lowest wait longer in the queue. This does not, however, explain why some non-paying users never receive answers to their complaints, or why the quality of customer service varies between payment levels. In addition to faster response times, higher paying users and VIPs receive superior communication from customer service representatives, meaning non-automated email responses, and a better overall tone from representatives:

> They have more personalized support…so, a non-pay user will get auto answers, even if they're just a normal pay user they'll get auto answers…The VIPs will get, "hey, how's it going? how was your day" you know "tell me about this problem, I'm really sorry to hear this happened." So, much more personalized support. (Lara, May, 2016)

Furthermore, higher-paying users receive more support and in-game item compensation. For example, when a user writes in an email that an error occurred and they lost a certain number of troops, a customer service representative can only conduct a certain amount of investigating to see if the user is lying or not. After a certain point, they have

to use their own judgment as to whether to believe the user. The company's policy is to believe that the user is always lying, to the point that the team to which the customer representatives interviewed belonged was called "The Nation of no Compensation". However, when VIPs and higher-paying users fill in support tickets claiming that they lost a certain number of troops or tools, they are much more likely to get compensated for their losses than non-paying or lower-paying users:

> I would say it's preferential treatment. If you put a lot of money into the game and you claim that you lost a lot of troops or something, yeah of course you're going to get them back, if you don't pay then you're not going to get them back. It's not like we go out of our way to contact them or give them anything but if they do write in they do get the preferential treatment. (Weasley, May, 2016).

As for those couple of players who have paid hundreds of thousands of euros while playing Empire (a certain number have spent over €200,000 [Weasley, May, 2016]), GGS will even repeat certain in-game events against the wishes of the entire community, just to appease these VIPs:

> We ran an event for spring then we ran it again because a VIP missed out... he missed out on his chance to get the piece of the equipment so we ran the event again, just for him. Just for this guy. Because he spent a lot of money, we just ran it for him...and everyone has been complaining on the forums like saying "we want a break. We don't want these events right now. We want a break for a month or whatever. Come back later" (Arcanine, May, 2016)

The company understands the value of commercializing Empire through certain accessory services. This is done by running in-house research, labeled 'AB' tests. These AB tests are when users are divided into one of two groups, with certain actions tested on each group. These tests were primarily used to examine the quality of customer service on VIPs, to see if the quality and speed of service could incentivize them into making even more microtransactions:

> I know that now they're doing some AB tests actually to try to see if the way you help a VIP can influence the amount of money they spend. So, they're actively trying to find ways to get them to spend more money. (Zelda, May, 2016)

Overall, the differences in customer service are emphasized through both structural features, such as the ticketing software which organizes users' emails based on their payment grades, and through operations protocol, which trains and forces customer operations personnel to deal with users in a segregated manner.

5.1.2.3.   VIP and Data Driven Design

Aside from this differentiation in treatment and service, another aspect that highlights the overtly commercialized development of Empire is the integration of user feedback and opinions in the future development of the game. Overall, as a general rule, GGS did not care about community feedback in regard to the future development of the game, as highlighted by various statements from interview participants: "If someone has a complaint about the game, you just tell them that their feedback is getting passed on, but nothing ever gets passed on. They don't actually really care about what the players want," (Lara, May, 2016). This, however, varies once again based on how much a player spends. Once a player puts a noteworthy amount of money into the game, the company is much more likely to listen to their feedback and their complaints, applying suggested changes to future updates:

> Everyone that plays is classified by their pay status but the majority of the time, it's usually just down to support tickets and so on and general feedback and suggestions. Because if some feedback comes from someone that spends over 10 thousand, we're more like to do something about it, then if it comes from a guy who spent no money. (Arcanine, May, 2016).

GGS will go to great lengths to find out just what makes their VIPs spend massively and how to make them increase this. They regularly invite the highest spending VIPs to their Hamburg office for meetings with their development and monetization teams, disguising these meetings as rewards for the players:

> We do a program in CM [community management] where we invite VIP players, so our top players, we actually invite them to come to our campus in Hamburg and they spend the day with the company and, of course, we're doing this for research. We take them to the business intelligence people, we take them to the game design people, pick their brains and try to see, basically, why they spend that much money… the people get to meet everybody in the company, even up to the chiefs, they get a cool little tour of the campus, meet the game design team, see how the games are made (Weasley, May, 2016).

While from a business perspective listening to the opinions of those who spend the most is reasonable, ignoring the voices of the majority of users, which in a F2P game are most likely to be non-paying users, may not be the smartest way to foster a healthy in-game environment, or a positive image as a game developer.

Aside from implementing the feedback and opinions of the highest spenders, changes in Empire also rely heavily on data. Even when the majority of the community voices its outrage regarding certain events or updates, the company will not roll out any changes or patch glitches in their game unless the data indicates that there is a need to do so.

The data that GGS looks at primarily concerns spending and microtransactions, not ac-cess or increase in player numbers. They are not interested in growing the community or increasing player satisfaction as much as they are in increasing their profits:

> The company is data driven, it's completely data beats opinion… So, we're running a new event in Empire and it goes over horribly according to the community, so you'll get maybe 200-300 posts saying shit event. But in the end the numbers come back and people spent a lot of money, that event won't get changed, they're going to run it again exactly the same way. (Weasley, May, 2016).

While the company collects various metrics on players which can be utilized in a num-ber of ways to increase their profits, such as growing the community base or increasing player satisfaction, community engagement and fandom, it seems to only be concentrat-ing on an obviously commercial strategy that is focused on increasing microtransactions. GGS' outlook is that if the data indicates people are spending money on a certain feature, then they must obviously like it. They are not being manipulated to use it, they are not being coerced to use it, and they are not using it because of psycho-logical trickery or due to the temporal/monetary dark patterns of game design. The above research, however, has highlighted that the position maintained by GGS does not cohere with a lot of players' experiences. The following section deals with how both Empire players and employees regulate certain practices in the game, attempting to counter not only player segregation, but this antisocial in-game environment brought on by aggressive monetization.

5.2.   Regulation

Within the circuit of culture, the context of regulation usually deals with the influence of non-producing organizations, such as governmental organizations, industry-wide organizations or in the case of F2P, even game platforms, such as the app stores (Google/Apple). However, there are several other types of regulation that can still be observed and discussed within this context, and which are applied in this research. These types of regulation include: individual regulation, or how an individual manages his or her own gaming; cooperative regulation, or how groups of players manage the in-game environment, whether through clans or bigger groupings; and finally, official regulation, or how the company/publisher officially decides to regulate the game itself.

The F2P model itself transforms official company regulation, or how the company regulates differently between paying and non-paying users, and in turn produces cooperative regulation, or users controlling their own community to counteract this tiered official regulation. Figure 6 below presents a central finding concerning the regulation of Empire during the 18-month ethnography. The business model itself, and its profit-centric application in Empire, was seen to transform certain company regulations, altering cooperative regulation in the in-game environment, and in turn allowing space for individual regulation by the players themselves. The specifics of these transformations are detailed clearly in the following Subchapter.

Free-to-play Business Model	Company Regulation	Cooperative Regulation	Individual Regulation
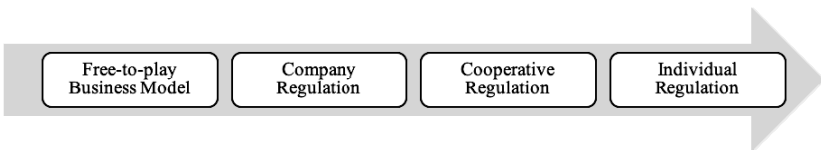
Figure 6: Directional transformation in regulation from top down due to business model.

5.2.1. Law Enforcement not Maintenance

While official in-game regulation could possibly also fall under maintenance, similar to other service components in the upkeep of a constant online game environment, the significant difference is that regulatory actions taken by the company are similar to 'policing,' enforcement of law, or the other actions conducted by non-producing organizations. In this case, however, they have a more direct influence on the gaming environment. Hence, GGS' official regulatory actions are dealt with in the context of regulation, instead of as part of the maintenance subtheme of the (re)production context. It is essential to look at how the official regulation by customer service representatives causes a community divide among players, including why this practice occurs, how it contributes to a negative environment, and finally the steps the players take in managing this undesirable environment through their own regulations.

5.2.1.1.   *Dividing the Community Through Official Rule*

Empire has certain rules of conduct that are stated by GGS in their terms of service. These rules are generally known to most players through experience, since most have not read the game's terms of service. When these rules are breached, it either results in warnings or in temporary bans. However, in extreme cases, breaches of conduct can result in permanent bans. Some examples of offenses include:

- Foul language and harassment: bullying players through aggressive language or play/conduct (e.g. aggressively attacking them).
- Multi-accounting: having more than one account on the same server, which is most often used to assist the player in gathering resources or mounting attacks.
- Account sharing: where users share passwords to each other's accounts and are able to log in and assist each other by completing time sensitive tasks, or defending incoming attacks when other players are unable to log in.
- Fraud: Using fake credit cards to make purchases, or making purchases and then claiming that they were falsely made to have them reversed, while still retaining the virtual property or currency.

Aside from fraud offenses, which more often than not will be handled by the finance and legal departments and will result in permanent bans should they prove to be true, other offenses are usually handled inconsistently, based on a user's pay status. This is not to say that GGS does not have a policy on how to handle these offenses: they do, in fact, have certain regulations. For example, they provide warnings for certain first offenses, then temporary bans for repeat offenses, and permanent bans if the offences are once again repeated. These guidelines are meant to be applied to all users, regardless of their pay status, however in practice this is often not done. Lara, describes that with cases of harassment, there's a 3-strike policy meant for all users, where initially users are banned for 6, 12, or 24 hours, and then permanently. However, if users have paid a significant amount of money into their accounts, they are not likely to get permanently banned, even for homophobic or racist remarks: "This guy is just going to be warned 'please don't say this, please don't do this' but we don't want to ban players who are VIPs in the game, who spent so much money. So, they'll probably just have an endless amount of warnings forever" (Lara, May, 2016). For other offenses, such as multi-accounting, for instance, GGS has different policies for higher paying users. Lara notes that the company will allow heavy spenders to have multiple accounts, contradicting their own terms of service. This further demonstrates questionable actions the company will take just to generate more profit, even at the cost of dividing the community:

> A lot of big spenders will have multiple VIP accounts […] in the same alliance. That gives them an advantage in the game. At the moment, right now, our policy is even though it's against our terms and conditions, if we can see someone spent a lot of

money, we're not going to ban them for it. So, it's more of a […] you'll get a warning about it, if you're a certain pay user, if you're a non-pay user we don't care, he gets banned. (Lara, May, 2016)

The reason for this sort of differentiated regulation and user treatment can be traced back to the profit focused development mentioned earlier in the context of (re)production. Building on this approach of game development, GGS' method to regulating Empire is to cater to the heavy spenders and VIP players, ignoring non-paying users. Therefore, the fair treatment of non-paying or low-paying users is not on their agenda. This is highlighted by the policies when it comes to dealing with matters of VIP users, as clarified by one CS agent interviewed:

From the beginning […] you had a lot more leeway as individual customer support agents, like there were rules but you could make your own decisions more or less. Now, it's like payment and monetization have said "please do not touch these VIP users and if you're going to ban them, you need to consult us first" and usually that will end up with them not being banned. They just don't want them banned at all, it doesn't matter what they do - they could do anything, it doesn't matter, they're not going to get banned. (Lara, May, 2016)

The involvement of monetization and payment departments in the regulation of the in-game environment emphasizes the profit-generating focus of the company. Furthermore, GGS allows certain offenses to be committed by higher paying users simply because these user practices generate said profit. For instance, when heavy spenders have multiple accounts, each being constantly charged with hundreds of euros, banning them for such an offense is simply not a smart business decision, even when it goes against the company's own terms of service. However, doing so for a non-paying user seems essential, since otherwise the game balance would be distorted. This is certainly not true, as the game balance is warped in both situations. The only difference is that one situation generates more money than the other. One community manager notes that while he would like to set an example for the community and permanently ban some high paying offenders for multi-accounting, the company forbids him from doing so, due to its "business over gameplay kind of mindset," (Arcanine, May, 2016).

Goodgame Studios' business approach to further its own economic interests at the expense of dividing the community comes at a cost. Not only does it warp the in-game environment negatively, but it also tarnishes the image of the company itself (discussed in Subchapter 5.5.).

5.2.1.2. Friendliness, Fairness and the Class Divide

Players naturally communicate with each other, both inside and outside of the game, and are aware when their harassers are just temporarily banned or simply receive warn-

ings, even after verbally assaulting them with racial/homophobic slurs. The same applies when users notice certain other users receiving warnings for having multiple accounts, while others have been banned for the same offense. Hence, it is common knowledge that there is a disparity in user treatment by GGS. While it might not be apparent to some users why this differentiation exists, it is clear to higher paying users why they receive this special treatment, and they have come to expect that sometimes the rules do not apply to them. The state of dissimilar rule application among users fosters quite a negative state within the Empire community, characterized by a mounting tension and lack of friendliness.

Aggressively monetized game mechanics can contribute to an antisocial in-game community, mimicking a war-time environment. However, when GGS and game representatives begin to personally differentiate between users, essentially creating a class divide, this generates a different sort of tension between user groups. This sort of strain creates animosity between non-paying and paying players, as well as a hierarchy of payment, deepening the divide between user groups in the community. This is especially true when VIP users flaunt their status over others in the game, recounting how they avoided getting permanently banned for a certain offense, or admitting to having attacked a player from multiple different accounts (Arcanine, May, 2016).

In addition to fueling tension in the community, this sort of tiered regulation decreases feelings of trust in the Empire community and faith in fair gameplay, as highlighted by one CS representative:

> Because people [who] play the game all the time see exactly that people that pay don't have to follow those rules. So, they see that [they] are blatantly cheating and winning doing it and of course it makes them upset because some people, I would say that most people, play the game fairly like with one account, you have that group that gets mad at people that are obviously cheating and getting away with it. (Weasley, May, 2016).

Whether it is getting away with having multiple accounts, or with not getting banned after a flood of aggressive harassment through in-game messages or gameplay attacks, players are aware that special exceptions are made for a select number of players.

This sort of differentiation is not much different from segregation and classist behavior that occurs due to real-life socioeconomic conditions, like class, race or gender[9]. As Empire matures and the community enters its advanced stages, it is becoming increasingly difficult to avoid these sensitive topics, such as preferential treatment and user segregation, and as Arcanine states, "It's hard to tiptoe around it because everybody knows," (May, 2016). Nevertheless, dedicated players (paying and non-paying alike)

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[9] For more about how the game world mirrors the real world, see 5.4.4.1.

who refuse to leave the community despite all of its negative aspects, have enforced a system of their own to curb the undesirable outcomes of this official in-game regulation as much as possible.

5.2.2. Cooperative Regulation

Using the terms of service initiated by GGS as a starting point, major alliances on each respective server came together to create 'fairplay' rules: a set of rules and regulations that aims to foster a healthy in-game environment for all players, one that protects both the interests of newcomers and veterans alike. Batten, a player from one UK server, states their server's respective 'fairplay' rules, noting two distinct sections: one dealing with contractual agreements, which builds on GGS' terms of service, and the other dealing with understandings between players and alliances that have developed over time on the server (Batten, 2017). 6eyes, the alliance leader interviewed, recounts the formation of the fairplay rules on his server, stating that there was "no fun in anarchy," and consequently:

> Sometime [sic] ago, the big alliances got together and they put down a number of rules, which became known as the "fairplay rules" a copy of which is on our alliance notice board. I thought it was quite interesting, because you know Goodgame wants us to fight each other because wars cost. If we were at war constantly, then you would spend fortunes on rubies [premium currency] because you need to heal your men quicker, you need to recruit quicker, you need to put your fires out instantly. So, a few [sic] from all the over the world came together and drafted these rules. So, it was like the United Nations. (6eyes, January, 2017)

It is interesting to observe players visualizing themselves as a united force and coming together to regulate each other for the betterment of the in-game environment. It is important to mention that fairplay rules are taken extremely seriously by players and enforced by alliance leaders, as highlighted by the same alliance head, "I have kicked players out for breaking them, I always advise people that if someone breaks the fairplay rules, then I will find out about it when the bigger alliances come down on us for breaking the rules," (6eyes, January, 2017). His statement details not only his actions in enforcing these community-enforced rules, but his fear of repercussions from other alliances or the so-called in-game 'United Nations'. Actions that go against these fairplay rules carry heavy consequences within the game, such as consecutive attacks and heavy bullying from players. This can be especially daunting when well-equipped alliances (real-life currency and consequently in-game resources) are upholding these laws, as the repercussions for breaking the rules can be major.

It is not only the fear of more powerful alliances that causes players to adhere to fairplay rules, but players also understand that it is in their own best interests to comply with

them to foster a better community. 6eyes, discusses why he insists on enforcing the fairplay rules:

> I think it makes it better for everybody because it would be easier for me, for exam-
> ple, if I wanted something to go and take it from a level 30 or level 40. There's a
> number of great outposts [resource castles] which belong to other players who are
> active and lower level, so I could take them very easy [sic] but I don't think it would
> be fair on the player and because it's not fair on the player, it also applies to me.
> Because a level 800 could come and take my outposts whenever they want. So,
> we're all gripped by the common rules and unless we all stick to them the best we
> can, we're all going to drown. (6eyes, January, 2016)

This interest stems from player investment in their own virtual goods and property in the game, as well as the real-world money investments they have made into their accounts.

Fairplay rules, as a form of cooperative regulation, also uphold a sense of community and exhibit ways in which the contexts of game culture are constantly interacting with and transforming each other. What is interesting to observe is how the fairplay rules are constructed for specific purposes, which can be clearly seen from certain guidelines created, such as ones used to maintain a sense of control over the environment, or pre-serving a sense of enjoyment for others by preventing excessive spending.

5.2.2.1.   *Fairplay Rules for a Pleasant Experience (and Less Consumerism)*

Several players interviewed stated that having these co-decided rules nurtures fun, lev-els the playing field, and prevents acts of bullying and that this, in turn, prevents count-less new and frustrated members from quitting the game. Some of these rules, such as averting attacks between players with huge level discrepancies or stopping attacks on castles that are already on fire (meaning they have already been attacked and the play-ers are repairing the damage), are established to prevent the bullying of players. Other rules, such as limiting the number of attacks between alliances or encouraging one-on-one alliance warfare, regulate war-time behavior and alliance affairs in a way that guar-antees the in-game environment remains agreeable and not too hostile or antisocial, as the game mechanics intend.

Other fairplay rules are mentioned regarding the ownership, takeover and transfer of virtual property. Some of these are officially documented, while others are only passed on verbally and vary between alliances. Rules such as no attacking or taking over of resource villages or islands, which as mentioned earlier are both rare, and status indica-tors for players, or no tool cleaning/sweeping attacks against players during normal play (attacks when players attack another's castle and claim all their tools, including ones they might have purchased for real money, adding a real-life loss) are agreed upon to

protect the investments of players and ensure that wars are not started over the shared virtual properties of players[10].

One other set of fairplay regulations deals with preventing the 'pay-to-win' practice. This leveling of the playing field is done by agreeing on rules that prevent users from taking actions that are only accessible to VIPs and frequently paying users, and would require plenty of real-life money to accomplish, which are hence discouraged. The types of actions prevented can be both accomplished through in-game mechanics, or through the way the company differentiates between users. For example, actions such as moving your castle to attack players (each move costs around 5000 rubies, which is around 5€ or more depending on the player's region), or having multiple accounts to generate resources, which most players know GGS permits VIP and heavy payers to do, are not allowed by fairplay rules.

What several of these rules attempt to is to prevent an overly aggressive wartime in-game environment and instead promote one that is as pleasurable as possible for both newcomers and old-timers alike. Through avoiding unnecessary wars, preventing bullying, and minimizing the takeover of virtual properties or goods, the organizers of these rules claim that they are trying to promote a healthy in-game community. While this is certainly true, and the environment is safeguarded thanks to these rules, fairplay is also advantageous because it curbs microtransactions and combats the overly commercialized game mechanics of Empire. This is entirely evident to older players, as stated by 6eyes, "because you know, Goodgame wants us to fight each other because wars cost," (January, 2016). Hence, these fairplay rules are not only a method of ensuring a pleasurable in-game experience for players, but also combat overly commercial game development and ensure an enjoyable out-of-game experience as well, one which might positively reflect on players' bank accounts. Still, fairplay rules do not entirely escape criticism: some might argue that these sets of rules add another level of restriction to an already fictional world.

5.2.2.2.   *Control Through Fairplay*

It is stated on the Empire forums that "These rules are designed to provide guidance, not to be used as mechanism of control," and that no "alliance or player will be forced to comply with them but rather you are encouraged to do so to help create a positive environment in which PvP [player vs. player] can develop rather than be constrained," (Batten, 2017). Still, as mentioned by 6eyes, failure to comply with fairplay rules leads to negative consequences both within players' own group formations and from outside influences (other alliances). The fairplay rules officially state that breaches to the code will be handled diplomatically at first, but "further responses will be expected to be propor-

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[10] See Subchapter 5.3.1.1. for more information on attachment to virtual property.

tionate," (Batten, 2017). Hence, there is some form of ambiguous control exercised through this cooperative regulation.

While several players find fairplay rules essential in maintaining a pleasant environment, other individuals voice concerns over the constrictive nature of these rules. After all, this is just a game, and a war game at that. Arcanine, the community manager, even states that his peak moment during his entire time playing Empire was breaking the fairplay rules:

> My happiest moment was when I attacked somebody's village and stole it from them, and then I got a tirade of aggressive messages from about 30 different people because that was absolutely hilarious. It was so funny. (May, 2016).

This necessity for control could presumably be linked to a missing sense of ownership, due to the virtual nature of the online game, which provides no physical cartridge or disc. The fact that players invest a lot of money into the game yet receive nothing in return other than digital currency and virtual property could leave them with a need to establish a sense of authority over the game. These issue of gamer identity and virtual property ownership are discussed in detail in the following section, under the Identification context.

5.3.   Identification

The context of identification in the circuit of culture deals with the continuing process of building identity based on dialogue or patterns communicated through games (Wimmer, 2012). Patterns and dialogues are based on two separate dimensions, either based on the game or community. Game-based dialogues or patterns are those which stem directly from the game itself; this includes aspects such as story or NPC text, quotations, and official instructions from the developers and UI (user interface) settings. However, since patterns are not as straightforward as 'dialogue,' this can be multifaceted. For example, game-based patterns include the actions of characters within the game, the fantasy setting itself, the costumes of these characters, or their fictional languages; they are not bound to one specific level. This means that game-based patterns are highly dependent on the game itself. For instance, during this ethnography, it was especially notable that users seem to identify with their virtual goods and properties, as specified later in this subchapter. These items are patterns specifically communicated in Empire.

Community-based patterns and dialogues, on the other hand, stem from in-game interactions with individuals. Examples of such dialogues come almost exclusively from in-game chats or other community communication channels, utilizing jargon and adapting original game terms. As for community-based patterns, these are either mostly formed by specific contexts facing the particular game community, or have to do with specific community formations themselves (alliances, clans, etc.). For example, in Empire, numerous community-based patterns observed are based on social matters and include ethical concerns, payment in games, fairness in play and the community divide, which will be later highlighted by users' identity negotiations. This was assumed to be normal, given the application of the F2P business model.

During the 18-month ethnography, the F2P model was seen to transform the identity of gamers through a constant negotiation process with various practices, such as the ownership of virtual items, their personal payment, and even the actions and values of GGS. Furthermore, the F2P model seems to transform how individuals identify the gaming group they participate in, or the community as a whole.

5.3.1. Personal Gamer Identity

The first observable issue within this context is how the F2P model gives rise to situations that catalyze a negotiation process between an individual's gamer identity and other matters. Determining the 'gamer' identity (as a gamer, casual, hardcore, or non-gamer) of interview participants and those observed during the ethnography was not easily accomplished. However, it was simplified given the measures mentioned earlier by Shaw (2013) in her study on gamers who do not self-identify as such. These measures are: self-identification (individuals describing themselves as gamers or not),

gaming usage (continuous usage of the medium), community involvement (participating in gaming communities) and media preferences (while preferences for certain hobbies and mediums are not indicative of the gamer identity, distaste for similar things sometimes is). Once a participant's gamer identity had been established, it was interesting to observe how this identity transforms their opinion, behavior and practices on a range of issues, from virtual property ownership to payment and the actions or values of GGS.

5.3.1.1.   Gamer Identity, Ownership and Attachment to Virtual Property

It was initially assumed that identifying as a gamer would alter an individual's feeling about ownership of virtual property and their personal game accounts. However, that did not turn out to be accurate. All Empire players interviewed, including those who self-identified and those who were recognized as 'gamers' through their gaming usage and community participation, were very aware that they did not own their virtual property or their accounts: "I look upon it as being mine, though. I know in the terms and conditions it's not and that it doesn't exist. It's just pixels on a screen," (6eyes, January, 2017). Other players echoed this opinion, stating that even though they feel that they own their accounts, they know this is not the case, and that GGS could delete their account, along with their castles, at any point. Still, it is interesting to observe the juxtaposition of this rational conclusion against their irrational attachment to their virtual property, which is possibly due to their monetary investments in it.


```
[17:49]          r: don't leave them in your main castle whilst you're
away though
[17:49]          r: FLs are hungry for flesh
[17:49]          : Nah mate
[17:49]          : I got that A Grade Defence
[18:07]          It's not a terrible set up but I'd still be scared for
those vet horrors
[18:08]          : generally offline set up you go heavy on one or
two flanks rather than trying to defend all three
```

Image 3: Alliance discussion on how to best setup defenses to protect premium troops when the user is offline.

However, regardless of feelings of ownership, and how individuals identify (casual, hardcore, gamer or non-gamer), almost all Empire players feel some form of frustration over the loss of virtual property (see Image 3, where players discuss how best to protect their troops during a Foreign Lords event). This can be either the loss of troops, tools, castles or even hypothetically losing their accounts; every participant interviewed recalled a scenario or situation where they were extremely annoyed over the loss of virtual items that had taken them either time or premium currency (real money) to amass. One of the CS representatives interviewed, who was not even a big fan of Empire, and a self-proclaimed casual gamer, states her disappointment in the following scenario:

> Empire frustrating moments were when people were taking my outposts because I
> had spent so much time getting them and making them have buildings that were
> producing and it was self-sustaining and I didn't actually have to do anything for
> them to just be there and work and then some random person in the middle of the
> night just took it from me. And then because I wasn't willing to spend so much time
> and effort to get them back, they were just lost [laughs] (Zelda, May, 2016).

Therefore, even as a casual gamer with no financial investment in the game, Zelda expressed frustration over her loss. However, compared to other Empire players interviewed, she did not express any emotional attachment or ownership over her property. Arcanine also notes this lack of emotional attachment in Empire when comparing it World of Warcraft (WoW), noting that the saddest moments in Empire are hindrances compared to real emotional loss in WoW:

> The moments […] are more sad because in our games they're more sad [sic] because it's just annoying, it's just annoyances that are out of your control, whereas
> the saddest moments in other games for me have all been when I've personally
> messed something up and it's been a huge loss or something like that. For example,
> WoW, we're doing a big raid or something […] I screw something up, we all die and
> we waste about an hour and a half that we were just putting into that thing. That's
> the kind of sadness you get from that, like a lack of accomplishment. You're trying
> really hard for something and I also think it's the kind of sadness that you can come
> back from, though. It's a sadness that helps you learn in a way. It's a sadness that
> you deal with in that way, like it's a loss but it's not … The losses in our game, especially when it's that kind of a loss, it's just a physical loss, it's not an emotional kind
> of loss. You're not that invested in it (May, 2016).

Feelings of attachment and emotional involvement with virtual property in Empire might seem related to gamer identity; however, they could also be related to financial investment. Out of the individuals interviewed, those who seem most attached to their virtual property are those who have invested the most financially. Still, gamer identity does have a role in this; because those willing to spend in Empire and most F2P games are those who can be identified as casual or non-gamers (but still might self-identify as gamers). This can be noted through their game usage, experience and community involvement in other games and with other consoles.

Most of those interviewed who had experience with other types of games than F2P, expressed that spending in Empire is not enticing, "I think it's a crazy amount of money for nothing. It's nothing you can keep," (Lara, May, 2016). Arcanine, Empire's community manager and a self-proclaimed hardcore gamer, plays several other F2P games, and expressed that he would gladly spend for cosmetic items, but still prefers not to spend outside of his company allowance in Empire. Consequently, the value, ownership and attachment to virtual property in Empire all seem to be related to an individual's invest-

ments in the game (see RQ2 for more details), not solely to gamer identity. On the other hand, matters regarding an individual's (and others') pay-status seem to heavily relate to their gamer identity.

5.3.1.2.   *Gamer Identity and Payment*

Both in Empire's community, other F2P gaming communities, and the general gaming environment, payment in F2P and other games that allow microtransactions is heavily debated. Therefore, it is of no surprise that problems arise between an individual's identity and payment in Empire. While there is not much discussion in-game of personal spending[11], both casual and hardcore gamers identified during the ethnography find that paying to win in Empire does not make one a 'gamer' in the classical sense, and more importantly, that it takes the joy out of the game (see Image 4).

The reason an individual negotiates their gamer identity when paying to win is because in doing so, they show a lack of skill, and proving one's skill is an essential cornerstone of this identity, "I play a lot of competitive games myself and it should always be down to skill, in my opinion," (Arcanine, May, 2016). This notion is only characteristic of someone with a true gamer identity, though, and Empire attracts a diverse range of players, ranging from casual, hardcore, in-between and even those who do not even identify as gamers at all. Therefore, there appears to be a duality in gamer identity in Empire that results in either pride or shame over payment.

> [01:28] ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮: I know it's a "war game" (and not a "farming game to quote our absent friend lol) but still say they're bullies
> [01:30] ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮: quite so ally, and especially as they seem to play it almost "professionally" and throw lots of money at it, instead of enjoying the game to pass the time

Image 4: Alliance discussion where spending behavior that is seen as excessive ruining the fun and environment.

For players who truly identify as gamers in the traditional sense, the initial sense of pride is achieved from showing real skill in Empire. This usually occurs from accomplishments in the game through their own effort alone, without any payment. The easiest way for players to realize this other than leveling their castles faster than paying players, is through player versus player contact. Gul'dan, the Empire game expert, articulates this exact sentiment when he recounts his most satisfying moment in-game:

> The happiest moment ever was when I was able to beat the player that clearly had spent a lot in the game but you saw that he doesn't really get the game, like it's this typical, I will buy millions of troops or something and then just without thinking put-

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[11] Discussed further under Appropriation context, see social rules, Subchapter 5.4.3.3.

ting them [sic]. And then defeating him, with let's say average castle [sic], or some-
thing, it was very satisfying. (May, 2016).

In addition to Empire, Gul'dan also plays multiple other games competitively, including
Hearthstone and Player Unknown's Battlegrounds (PUBG), so it is clear that to him, skill
is essential to any successful gamer. Hence, he takes pride in having beaten another
player who was paying to win, one who had spent a significant amount of money on
tools and troops but had failed because he lacked essential ability and knowledge.

While spending was common among players of various identities in Empire, according
to the CS representatives and community managers interviewed, it seems that those
who did not spend as much, and gained their achievements through hard work, are
sometimes seen as superior: "If they manage to achieve something then people have
more respect for them in a way," (Zelda, May, 2016). This is what leads to shame and
people lying about individual spending habits; whether it is about spending more than
they do, or less, players do not seem to be honest about their purchasing habits for var-
ious reasons. Arcanine notes that whenever new expensive features are released,
players that normally purchase them will complain that it is unfair for those who cannot
afford these features, right before making the purchase themselves (May, 2016). It is
almost as if players are easing their shame and guilt right before their purchases, which
helps them to take advantage over other players.

Oddly enough, and due to the tiered official regulation of Empire, there are individuals
on the other end of the spectrum who pride themselves on being heavy spenders in the
game (VIPs). One CS representative recounts the actions of some of these players:

> They would say I spent a million euro, some people had this tendency when they
> wanted to somehow show that they have relations with customer support, like they
> are in cahoots with us because they spend a lot of money. And, oh my god, we are
> helping them achieve I don't know what, which all of the time is not true. But by say-
> ing they spent a lot of money the claim got some weight to it (Zelda, May, 2016).

While some players might be lying to execute this as an intimidation strategy (given that
is common knowledge that GGS treats heavy spenders better), others might be genu-
inely telling the truth and proud to be spending so heavily on the game. This is regard-
less of whether they are doing so to get a competitive edge, or to display their position
in the community and indicate their status (more on payment and status below).

Nevertheless, an individual's gamer identity alters these feelings over spending, with
those who identify as hardcore gamers, especially of other games than Empire (or F2P
ones), not expressing any pride but instead being ashamed of their spending habits.
Similarly, gamer identity plays a role in negotiating how individuals feel about GGS'
business practices and values overall. This was evident in both players and employees.

5.3.1.3.   *Employee Identity and Company Values*

Within the company's customer service and community management departments are a number of employees that identify as hardcore gamers, casual gamers, and even non-gamers (although this is more common in customer service than community management). These various identities lead to a wide range of alignments with GGS' business outlook, practices and values.

Nevertheless, regardless of how individuals identify (hardcore, casual, or non-gamer), almost all employees interviewed seem to have some problems with how GGS handles certain situations and their procedures. Zelda (casual), who worked in the Romanian market and had little supervision, found it unethical to answer higher paying users first. Therefore, she preferred to answer customer tickets in chronological order, regardless of payment status. Gul'dan (hardcore) finds the company's decision to not ban VIP and heavy pay users who constantly harass the community extremely negative, possibly having harmful consequences for the overall environment. Moreover, as stated earlier, Arcanine (hardcore), much like other community managers, felt that the company should cater to more than just the paying users, and should listen to the voices of the community as a whole:

> Everybody should have their opinion heard at least, everybody should have a valuable opinion. Just because you don't spend money doesn't mean you don't know what you're talking about. And just to do things based off that, it's a little bit unfair to me, like as a gamer myself. (May, 2016).

Lara (casual, borderline non-gamer) finds the company's practice in attacking players to incentivize microtransactions completely unethical, especially in the case where they launched a massive shadow attack against the entire server: "It was stupid and it was unfair because they had no chance to attack, they had no-one to attack and they were unrealistic attacks because no other player would have done this. It was insane," (May, 2016).

Still, regardless of how employees identify and feel about the company's practices or values, they understand GGS' approach as profit-oriented and not as focused on producing fun or innovative products:

> It's not really fair but I can understand it from a business perspective, because you do want to make money, it's not like you don't want to make money. Ideally it would be a great company who [sic] has enough resources that everyone gets treated the same (Zelda, May, 2016).

Zelda, who has her own approach to answering users that she deems fair, concedes that the company's policy does make business sense. But it is Lara who puts it best when she says, "I think it [tiered service] makes sense business wise. Fairness, in soci-

ety, in the game world, it's the same thing. It's capitalism and it's not fair. It's the way the system works and the system is shit but it is what it is," (May, 2016). Not only casual gamers but most employees, even the most passionate hardcore gamers like Arcanine and Gul'dan, understand that the company is in the end a business, and they adjust their expectations to meet that reality. They represent completely different kinds of game workers from those cited by Wimmer and Sitnikova (2011), who identify strongly with the company they work at and feel like a part of the studio where they are employed, because of their interest in games. At GGS, and possibly other F2P companies, individuals, even entirely passionate gamers, understand that they are working at a profit-oriented business, and hence, might not strongly identify with the company in the same way as ones who work in traditional game studio.

5.3.1.4.   *Gamer Identity and Company Values*

The way players identify also plays a role in how they negotiate certain matters regarding the company's practices and values. However, in the case of players, it is not the gamer identification (hardcore, casual, non-gamer) that matters as much as which group they identify with: paying or non-paying players (group identification is discussed in the next section). Empire players who identify with paying players, for example, seem to have faith in the company, and trust its actions.

> [22:55]   : I think it is time you stopped this before it gets out of handI guess you are young and have a future but what you are doing is a bordering on criminal Would be a shame if the police get involved but beleive me GGE have a responsibility to report this if it continuesI will not repeat this message
> [22:56]   d: that will definetilay get to them

Image 5: Threats sent to opposing alliances showing faith in GGS supporting actions

One case concerns the alliance leader 6eyes and a younger member, who was being bullied by another alliance. To assist the younger member, 6eyes messaged the other alliance saying that GGS would get involved if they did not cease their actions, and that he had sent in tickets to GGS, which he linked in alliance chat (see Image 5). 6eyes believed that GGS would not hesitate to involve the police or other law enforcement should the bullying get too far out of hand. The way in which 6eyes communicates with the other alliance, and relays the communication to his own alliance, exhibits the faith he has in the company to take the correct moral actions, because he is a paying member. He even believes the company can take this sort of action without realizing that they really only have jurisdiction within Germany (as stated in the terms of service).

Furthermore, in his personal interview, 6eyes openly expresses this trust in GGS. This can be either attributed to his pay status or the fact that he is always on the positive end of tiered regulation:

> I've had cause to complain in the past and they've always put right what went wrong. And there's been a number of times when there's been a bug that's affected me and some of my players, and I've reported it to Goodgame and they've always, where possible, put right stuff that went wrong. (6eyes, January, 2017).

His statement also shows his confidence in the company rectifying these bugs just to improve the game community, and not actually to appease the paying players, hoping to generate more microtransactions and profit.

On the other end of the pay-spectrum, non-paying players are constantly criticizing GGS for refusing to fix specific bugs, for incessant "money-grabbing" activities, and the company's practices and values overall. This was repeatedly demonstrated through social media channels, such as Facebook, but not the official forums, which were heavily moderated. Moreover, due to a lack of trust, or confidence in GGS, non-pay users rarely communicated with CS representatives or community managers concerning serious issues. They mostly reached out regarding password resets or minor matters. On the other hand, heavy spenders or VIP users were the ones who would constantly communicate about minor bugs, balancing issues and the like (Zelda, May, 2016). This is probably because heavy-paying users were the ones who trusted the company, and did not care about its true profit-centric and business-oriented nature.

Agreeing to and trusting in GGS' practices and values is the sort of behavior that is negotiated not by individual gamer identification (as a hardcore, casual or non-gamer), but by group identification, meaning which group an individual identifies with: paying or non-paying users. This practice is something that could be entirely unique to Empire, F2P, or other games utilizing microtransactions and which allows for the separation of users along payment lines.

5.3.2. Identifying with Clans and the Community

Video games, as a digital medium, are unique in their ability to provide various facets for their users to identify with, ranging from interactive gameplay, or narratives, to engaging communities and online groups. Van Looy et al. (2010) devise a specific scale to measure such identification in MMORPGs that narrows down player identification to three specific types: group (alliance) identification, game (community) identification and avatar (character) identification. This scale is best utilized for Empire, since two out of three types of identification are heavily present in the game (group and community). Avatar identification did not manifest in the sample because the player does not control a single character, and it is not easy to identify with an entire landmass instead of a personal character that a player embodies. When avatar identification did manifest, however, it was related to attachment to virtual property and coded as such. Hence, attention to

these practices in Empire is primarily given to group (alliance) and community-based identification.

5.3.2.1.   *Playing with Payment Classes: Group Identification in Empire*

Group identification, as mentioned by Van Looy et al. (2010) notes identifying with one's guild in an MMORPG, which in Empire commonly appears as identifying with one's alliance. Alliances are group formations, and are Empire's equivalent to guilds or clans in MMORPGs. While group identification is quite common in all types of multiplayer and online games, what is unique to Empire (and possibly other multiplayer F2P games) is that group identification is sometimes centered on payment status; meaning that users identify with others based on how much they are, or are not, paying into the game.

What most noticeably indicates the practice of players identifying with a group of a certain pay status is the existence of elitist alliances, ones that only allow paying users to join. While the opposite types of alliance might also exist, those only permitting non-paying users, they were not observed during the ethnography. Individuals interviewed noted that they only fraternize (and identify) with those within their own payment group, as observable from what one player states "those that spend money big time … could be branded as elitist," (Eek, January, 2017). Here, Eek, also a paying user, not only differentiates himself from other high-paying users, but also adds later that he does not interact much with assumed "elitists," aka those in higher payment brackets. Lara, the CS representative, notes that there is certainly bitterness between different user groups in Empire:

> Obviously [segmentation] makes the non-pay players resentful of the pay players because they clearly have an advantage over them even if you're just spending like a normal pay user, spending like 10 dollars or 20. You just can't compete. Yeah, it builds up a lot of resentment between alliances, between people in general. It just makes them angry (May, 2016).

However, group identification goes beyond simple distaste for a different group, or association with related paying users, and extends to more obstructive practices. These include restricted alliances with rigorous rules, which only permit players based on specific spending habits. 6eyes notes that he has spotted several alliances with public descriptions stating, "conditions of entry […] of being a member […] would require you to spend rubies [real money] to be in there" (January, 2017). Therefore, there is an observable divide between players of different pay statuses, with those paying choosing to sometimes play exclusively with their own.

One reasoning for this sort of separation and identification with different pay-groups (and therefore alliances) is presumably due to competitive pressures propagated through dark game design patterns, as well as the aggressive in-game environment.

Lara, comments on these competitive pressures when offhandedly mentioning some elitist alliances: "We even have alliances on the server who actually say only ruby buyers in their alliance description. Like they don't want anyone who's non-pay because they know they're not competitive in the game, so, it's completely useless to have them," (May, 2016). This is one reason why these sorts of separatist alliances exist, and most possibly why players have no qualms about identifying with them, since they fulfill their needs for success and rivalry.

5.3.2.2.   *Acquaintances with Benefits*

Possibly due to group identification focused on pay status, competitiveness and personal benefit, connections between alliance members in Empire seem to be weaker than in other MMORPGs or multiplayer games. It is not possible to compare Empire to every other game individually, because the researcher did not partake in an ethnography of another MMORPG or similar non-F2P multiplayer game. However, there are several observations made of the alliance over the 18-months and their interactions, as well as answers in interviews, that led to this assumption.

Firstly, most members of the alliance which the researcher was a part of can be considered quite close-knit. They converse almost daily in alliance-chat, and about more than just the game: they discuss their personal lives, their families and their hobbies (see Image 6). However, regardless of how close they seemed and whatever off-topic or real-world discussions they had, members interviewed still hesitated in labeling their alliance contacts as real friends, preferring to call them acquaintances instead. Eek notes that he enjoys being friends with his old alliance on the mobile version of Empire (E4K), and then quickly corrects himself: "Still being mates with some of the players I left behind in the android version is also a kick…Well 'mates' is probably too strong a word but more like acquainted with," (January, 2017). Meanwhile, 6eyes describes his relationship with his alliance members as being similar to work ones, further proving the mutualist nature of these alliances:

> I guess they'd call them acquaintances like you have at work. So, I get emails from people and I talk with them but we've never met. I'm very friendly with them and they're very friendly to me, we sometimes have a joke in an email but I would call them acquaintances (January, 2017).

What was observed in DTS Titanium is that players do not communicate much outside of the game, except to warn each other of attacks, furthering the "work-like" relationship based on reciprocal benefits. Interviewed alliance members expressed no interest in actually meeting each other, preferring to keep their relationships purely online, as expressed here by the alliance leader:

> I have a rule you know, you should never meet Mr. X, for example, because Mr. X is
> Mr.X and I have an image in my mind of what Mr. X looks like in real life, which I'm
> holding on to. So, it's a contained fantasy, which you shouldn't break […] I've got no
> real desire to meet Mr. X or any of the other players (6eyes, January, 2017).

This overall identification with groups (alliances) based on mutual benefits, driven by a need for success and a competitiveness instead of real bonds, further fragments the community along payment status, differentiating it yet again from some classical pay-to-play games. Nevertheless, no matter how divided the community becomes, the one issue that can unite it is standing against GGS itself.

5.3.2.3.   *Fragmented but Whole: Empire Community Identification*

As seen in the way users identify with groups of their own payment status, and with the alliances they have formed in exchange for mutual competitive benefits, the Empire community seems disjointed. While it is expected that in a war-themed game, users would be split along alliance lines, as this is completely normal and within the fictional lore and rules of the game, being torn along payment status lines is an additional barrier.

Nevertheless, there still appears to be one ultimate cause that brings the community together, and that is fighting against GGS' erroneous actions. While the community is divided about the company's values and regular business practices, they will still band together and fight large game-wide issues that span multiple servers. Arcanine notes that compared to other games he has played, in Empire the only sense of community he has noticed comes from these negative topics:

> I've seen the sense of community comes [sic] from our changes and negative per-
> ception of the game. They're together against us, in a way. They're together against
> the heavy monetization, they see problems with the game and they unite over that,
> that's their common ground. Whereas with other Free-to-Play games I play, it's usu-
> ally unity purely for the love of the game and purely for discussion of the game and
> tactics and so-on. While as I feel, even though our guys really do care about the
> game and they're really into it, it's usually they come together more often when it's
> to give us negative feedback (May, 2016).

This contradicts the notion that no real community exists in Empire: surely a type of community does. Arcanine even concedes that players do assist each other, but still it is not the same type of community as in other games. Other employees interviewed also note that there is heavy discussion, user generated content[12], and community involvement (Weasley, Zelda & Gul'dan, May, 2016). Still, while there might be a sense of

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[12] However, the actual amount of user-generated content observed during the ethnography was entirely lacking compared to other gaming communities.

community, this does not change the fact that the community itself is divided along both fictional and nonfictional lines, slightly breaching the magic-circle.

In a similar way to how individuals identify with others of similar pay status, the ways in which a user identifies with the Empire game community may be transformed by their pay status as well. To distinguish how users identify with the game community, special attention was given to players' community involvement during participant observation and interviews. The more players were involved in the community (through specific game practices) and the more their statements indicated their attachment to and involvement with the Empire community itself, the higher their community identification was assumed to be.

```
[12:23]          : evening
[12:25]          : hello
[12:36]          : hello t          , do are doing well tonight
[12:37]          : yes thanks norris, although it's a cold, dull
morning here
[12:39]          : where runing around in short sleeves
[12:40]          : maybe we could swap places lol
[12:42]          house swap for the christmas
[12:43]          she was asking me not you
[12:44]          tweetie you can have a 40 c summer here
[12:44]          : lol - no fighting over me boys ha ha
[12:44]          : do you get snow where you are for christmas
[12:46]          : sadly don't get snow at christmas, I'm in south of
england, used to live in North Yorkshire and that was very snowy
[12:49]          got to love a white christmas
[12:51]          : yes makes it more special - always looks good in
films
[12:53]          : yes it always looks great
```

Image 6: Casual alliance chat sharing quite a bit of personal details around Christmas time.

What was observed was that the higher paying users were more involved in the community than lower and non-paying users. This, however, was not constant and there were quite a few exceptions. Still, both players and employees interviewed (especially community managers) state that in their own experience, the players they have seen to be most devoted to the community are usually the ones who have invested the most financially as well:

> Personally, what I've seen is a lot of people [sic] that are big spenders are also the big leaders in the game and that's part of the reason why they also spend is because they want to look after their guys. They want to look after the people they play with, even the guys that don't spend any money. They want to be a sort of symbol to them, to show they are a powerful player and they can teach them and they can help them with things. Yeah, they spend to sort of hold their status and be leaders in the community (Arcanine, May, 2016).

For heavy spenders, financial investment in the game is not only seen as spending in the form of individual microtransactions on their own accounts, but it is also a form of

investment in the community itself, supporting their alliance and establishing status (see Subchapter 5.4.1.3). This is done through both formalized game-mechanics, such as premium currency donations to the alliance bank, or informal means, such as facilitating takeovers of outposts equipped with tools and troops, purchased with premium currency, and with quite a high real-world monetary value.

As for non-pay users, community involvement is usually in the form of user-generated content, such as user guides on how to progress without payment, or how to make the most out of the meager supply of premium currency that in-game quests provide:

> You get some users on the forum who actually write guides on how to not buy rubies and how to make the most of the rubies that you have. Like purchase important things and try not to spend it on unnecessary things. So, we do have level 70 players who've never purchased rubies before, which is crazy when you think about it. They're very rare and far between [sic] but they do exist. So, it's taken them years to reach this level in the game, to reach one of the highest levels without purchasing in the game (Lara, May, 2016).

As Lara indicates, non-pay users who show this level of community involvement and commitment are uncommon. Therefore, using community involvement as a measure of identifying with the Empire community itself, it seems that an individual's pay status is what impacts their involvement, and therefore their identification with it. Arcanine summarizes the disparity in user involvement best when he discloses the difference in how users communicate with him on the forums:

> The higher paying users are usually a lot more well-spoken. They like to discuss their ideas with me, they'll talk to me directly and they'll actually spend a lot of time talking to me and giving me constructive feedback, like telling me what they would change and how would they change it. Whereas the lower paying users tend to just tell me "x sucks" or "y is too expensive" and it's like could you give me a little bit more information? And they don't bother because they don't care as much (May, 2016).

While this might not be true for all users or all channels of communications, this example illustrates how community involvement, and therefore community identification, might vary and relate to user pay-groups.

Empire (and, it is assumed, other F2P games) represents a unique gaming environment where certain practices can occur, such as group and community identification related to user payment, as well as the negotiation of a player's gamer identity based on their spending habits, or the company's practices. Furthermore, spending seems to transform the appropriation context of the game culture, or how the game is used, played and embedded in the daily lives of the gamers, as will be indicated in the following subchapter.

5.4.   Appropriation

Within the context of appropriation, phenomena or practices concerning how games are played, used and embedded in daily life are observed. The F2P model transforms not only the practice of playing, but also others, such as specific spending habits, or the budgeting of currency, which might not even exist in traditional pay-to-play games. Additionally, the F2P model might alter how the game is integrated into a player's daily schedule, as well as their social relationships in the game. In Empire (and possibly other F2P games), the payment model even alters the boundaries between the real and game worlds, causing a spillover between the two, where players' motivations transfer into the game world and some harsh non-virtual realities transfer into the fictional game-world.

5.4.1. Play and Purchasing

An essential part of Empire (and most F2P) gameplay is based around microtransactions. While there are players who avoid making a purchase during their entire time playing Empire, some (if not most) tend to make one or two microtransactions along the way. If not with real money, they do this with their accumulated in-game premium currency, won through hard-earned quest rewards. Hence, the spending of in-game premium currency and purchasing of both decorative and functional items is a fundamental aspect of the appropriation context of Empire, if not of all F2P games. Initially, players who spend regularly in Empire form spending routines which they tend to maintain over time, managing their budgets, and even self-assessing these habits. This not only transforms the incorporation of the game in their daily lives, but also how it is experienced by others who do not make purchases.

5.4.1.1.   Spending Practices and Habits

There are several qualitative and quantitative studies probing F2P players on what they spend money on in F2P games, and why (see Subchapter 2.4.3.3.). Hence, this is not the main concern when observing the spending habits of players in the ethnography of Empire; instead, focus was given to *how* players spend (through specific practices) and how they make sense of this spending.

Initially, it seemed that longtime players of Empire (or at least those who form part of the alliance observed and later interviewed in this research) had all established a spending allowance for the game. These budgets function in a similar way to a MMORPG subscription that charges a player a certain amount per month. But instead of having the amount automatically charged to a user's credit card or bank account, the players interviewed claimed that they bought premium currency for only a specific amount per month, which would ideally be enough to help them manage their in-game requirements: "Normally £15 a week unless I have done overtime, when I can persuade Mrs. X

to let me spend a bit more," (Mr. X, January, 2017). As Mr. X states, his monthly allowances can be influenced by real world factors, such as his wife's opinion and his real-world salary. Similarly, Lowlander states that he bases his purchasing on which bills need to be paid in a certain week (January, 2017).

There are also in-game factors that can influence this monthly allowance. 6eyes notes that there are certain situations which call for increased monthly spending, such as alliance tournaments, or periods of increased gaming activity that necessitate additional premium currency in the hope of protecting one's virtual assets:

> If I could see someone attacking me…I literally went out and bought some rubies and then beefed up my defense, or bought some defense troops. But on the whole, I try not to spend more than that because I just don't want to spend the money. (January, 2017).

Even while reluctant to do so, 6eyes does increase his spending during certain in-game situations, as do other players interviewed.

Nevertheless, what is common in both these situations is that players will almost always only purchase currency when it is on sale. In Empire, there are certain periods labeled Prime Times, when players are able to purchase double or even triple the amount of premium currency for the same amount of money (see Image 7). The times of these sales are not known to the players, and they are usually on a countdown timer to incentivize purchasing. So players try to make the best of them when they appear. The more experienced players know that these sales occur frequently, and they therefore know not to make a regular purchase unless absolutely necessary, waiting for primetime sales to make one instead: "All you're buying is pixels, really. As long as you time it right, when an offer is on. You get enough rubies to sustain a lot of activity for that money," (6eyes, January, 2017).

With regular monthly (or sometimes weekly) payments, playing Empire can develop into quite an expensive hobby, and some players justify this spending by claiming it as their only indulgence: "I don't drink or smoke, so, why not spend the odd amount of money playing a game I enjoy" (Lowlander, January, 2017). Still, as discussed earlier in the production context, Empire has been developed in such a way as to incentivize a questionable amount of microtransactions. Hence, a number of players also implement in-game budgeting strategies in addition to their real-world allowances. These are usually conducted together with other individual strategies for assessing both their financial and time investment in the game.

Image 7: Example Prime Time offer pop-up which appears in-game with countdown timer and explanation of how the offer works.

5.4.1.2.   *Budgeting and Self-Assessment*

Having a set amount to spend on Empire per month (or week) limits most of the interviewed players to spending their premium currency on specific items. This budgeting of in-game currency (as a counterpart to the real-world imposed allowance they mentioned earlier) is done, one assumes, to lessen the impact of the aggressive monetization seen in Empire's development. Budgeting your in-game currency is essential for success in Empire: "in our game, it's also how you use the money you invested […] You use it badly and you're not going to be top of the leaderboards anyway but as long as you use it efficiently then you can be," (Lara, May, 2016).

It is apparent that long-time, dedicated players of Empire implement budgeting strategies of their in-game premium currency in ways that supplement their own motivations for playing the game. For example, achievement-oriented players who are focused on advancement (Yee, 2005), are more likely to budget their currency to spend on items and features that improve their castle and assist in leveling up, while refraining from spending on cosmetic items: "My spending of rubies mainly goes on building upgrades. Some things I won't spend rubies on like decorative buildings," (Pott, January, 2017). On the other hand, players who are focused on competition (Yee, 2005) are more likely to budget their premium currency to spend on attacking tools and troops, essential items needed to be able to remain competitive in the game for both PvP and non-player combat. An archetype of this sort of budgeting is 6eyes:

> I'm doing my best to spend the minimum amount of money on the game to achieve what I want to achieve, which is to be able to attack, predominantly in the non-player games, in terms of events, etc. Which I believe they geared up…that you have to spend rubies to actually do well in them. Because I don't think you can do well in any of the events they hold without spending some money (January, 2017).

Not only is 6eyes attentive to the increasingly aggressive monetization by GGS, but he is also exercising financial self-assessment, which can be seen from his awareness of his budgeting process, and how it is motivated by his competitive drive or gaming incentive.

It then becomes clear that, for several long time Empire players, self-assessment of both financial and time investment in the game is quite common, especially when players are suspicious of the developer's intentions. Interviewed players were all precisely aware of how much they had spent over the years playing Empire, not hesitant to state comparatively large numbers ranging between €3000-6000 over an average of five years (6eyes, Eek, Lowlander & Mr. X, January, 2017).

Players also assess their financial investments by justifying their purchases or the price of in-game items before making them. Eek, for example, will first ask himself if what he is about to purchase is a necessity or a luxury, since at his current level his castle can be considered "complete" and anything other than attack or defense tools would be considered decorative (Eek, January, 2017).

A final self-assessment strategy is to compare financial investment in Empire to other media spending and hobbies. Several players justify their in-game allowances through this strategy, such as Mr. X who states that, "I feel £15 a week is not bad for a week's gaming, compared to other entertainment options [such as] cinema, ten pin bowling, purchase of DVDs [or] books," (January, 2017). Others use this strategy as justification and self-assessment of their time-investment, not just their financial one:

> For me it was like, free time, people like to go out, have some beers and stuff, if I'm sitting at home playing free games, why don't I pay 5 euros […] Plus I'm not studying anymore that [sic] I can play 12 hours per day or something, (Gul'dan, May, 2016).

Gul'dan, the Empire game expert, assesses his financial investments as worthy by equating them with other people's weekend activities. He also associates his financial investment in the game with his own time investment (featuring both types of self-assessment), noting that he does not have as much time to pour into the game, so he can take advantage of the time/money trade off instead of grinding endlessly.

5.4.1.3.   *Spending and Play Experience*

Paying money to skip the tiresome grind is just a small reflection of how an individual's microtransactions, or spending in Empire, can alter their playing experience. During the participant observation and interviews, it was seen that spending can obviously transform a player's performance in the game (due the way the game has been developed), as well as an individual's sense of accomplishment, their feelings of pressure and even enjoyment derived from playing.

As discussed in the production context, Empire is monetized quite aggressively, making it difficult for non-paying players to compete with those who do spend. This situation transforms the playing experience for both types of player simultaneously. Initially, for non-paying players, gameplay becomes quite challenging, as described by Pott here:

> You have to spend some rubies creating essential buildings that perform functions no other non-ruby building can provide. For example, without adequate hospital [sic] most of your troop would be lost in battle. You could play the game without spending rubies or rather just pillaging the odd few the game provides, but it would limit your progress in the game and make the game incredibly frustrating (January, 2017).

In addition to Pott, other players interviewed all state that not purchasing premium currency in Empire has a dire effect on an individual's performance, hindering the speed at which they are able to improve their castle and perform basic in-game tasks like attacking others. This, of course, leads to frustration with the game.

Nonetheless, the irritation felt by non-paying players can also be due to not being able to compete with paying players. As discussed earlier, due to Empire's development, (significant) payment is mostly what is required for success:

> The amount you spend kind of directly affects how powerful you are in the game. So, you buy the tools and the troops and so on and they make you stronger and usually you'd have wait times for them to build but you can buy the strongest ones and just constantly use them, basically. So, if you want the strongest stuff in the game, you have to spend money on it (Arcanine, May, 2016).

While having the strongest equipment and the most in-game currency does not always guarantee success, it does increase one's chances, and topping the leaderboards are usually players who have invested most money in the game (Lara, May, 2016). This sort of spending provides what is presumably an enjoyable gaming experience for those who are able to devote enough money and time to enable them to top the leaderboards and always finish first. Nevertheless, this results again in a divide between user groups, one that is observable enough to cause frustration in non-paying and lower paying users:

> There's like a big gap that we refer to in our game a lot and the forums always talk about. The guys that do spend money are like the leaders, basically, of the entire server. They are the most powerful guys, they always will be and everyone knows they will be and like spending money is such a huge divide. You spend money and you are part of the elite, so to speak and it really divides the game. It makes it im-balanced in a way (Arcanine, May, 2016).

Hence, by spending a noteworthy amount of money in Empire, you can not only en-hance your gaming experience, increasing the speed of certain processes and purchas-ing exclusive buildings or items, but you are also joining an elite group of users. This is a group of heavy-spending users, who receive an equal amount of respect and criticism in the community.

For most individuals, other than a select few dedicated professionals and collectors, gaming can be considered a low-cost hobby or activity. However, the practice of microtransactions in play, which is only present in F2P games, pushes gaming into more expensive realms, challenging its low-cost label. This new practice signals a trans-formation in the overall culture, or perhaps the emergence of a subculture completely distinct from traditional pay-to-play games (more on this in Chapter 6.0). Furthermore, due to certain aspects of its design, Empire, possibly like some other F2P games, could display new ways of being incorporated into the daily lives of its players compared to traditional pay-to-play games.

5.4.2. Daily Integration and Challenges

In Empire, both the players interviewed and those observed tend to integrate gameplay rather uniquely into their daily lives, compared to players of traditional pay-to-play, or subscription games. Most players stated that they played the game for between three and five hours a day. Initially, this number of hours per day seems surprising for individ-uals who technically do not classify as classic gamers, but what really differentiates Empire's daily appropriation from other traditional games is that these three to five hours are spread out over the entire day. In that sense, dedicated Empire players are constantly online throughout the entire day, only taking breaks to be in the real-world instead:

> Try to play every day, used to log on before work but [the] game is now so compli-cated cannot do it justice in that half hour, now log on when I get home midafternoon and stay on until bed unless have things to do around house or in real life, if for short period normally say afk [away from keyboard] if longer will log off and on again when free (Mr. X, January, 2017).

Most players have also indicated their habit of being constantly online, which could be attributed to temporal dark patterns, possibly requiring the player to be on their account to queue troops, or check on the status of their castle or defenses. Alternatively, this could also be attributed to Empire's genre as a game. As a real-time-strategy (RTS) game, no turns can be taken, and the player must constantly be alert to actions that could be carried out on their virtual property. In other games within this genre, such as Starcraft 2 or Warcraft III, battles are usually restricted to specific time periods, or there is a goal which signals the end of the match. This usually assists users in deciding to end their play session or continue on to another one. However, in Empire, this is not an option, as the player is part of a massive, multiplayer online community, and even when choosing to end their play session, they cannot choose to take their virtual property offline, protecting it from other players.

One final possible reason for this sort of daily integration is Empire's ease of access. As a browser game, it is convenient for players to have the game open in a secondary tab or window and simply access it while conducting other business on their home or work computers. This is similar to other F2P games played on mobile phones as well. Which is also possibly why multiple users also stated that they tend to play Empire at the same time as doing other things. Other activities conducted while playing Empire range from watching television and "not actively playing just keeping one eye on the game," (Eek, January, 2017) to constantly checking on your account during working hours because of having "the opportunity to work from home" (6eyes, January, 2017).

Due to being accessed in parallel to a working environment, or possibly due to Empire's regular inspection-like gameplay nature, where one logs-on just to assess the damage to their property and manage certain tasks, the appropriation (and gameplay) of Empire can begin to feel like a job in itself. Zelda mentions one player, a volunteer moderator on her Romanian forums, who was so dedicated to the game and community "she didn't work, so she was a stay at home mom but I feel like this was actually, at least her part time job," (May, 2016). Additionally, Empire gameplay begins to burden its players in a similar way to how a normal occupation would, adding real-world stresses and pressures, especially for those in leadership positions:

> You end up taking on problems which aren't yours, you know. So, a lot of the things that go on, you don't as a player see. So, as a leader I'm constantly, sometimes all the time, making sure that we're alright in the alliance and all the time contacting leaders of other alliances, just keeping stuff moving and keeping them out of our face (6eyes, January, 2017).

Added pressure because of a leadership position might be common in other games, whether F2P or not. However, what adds to Empire's job or occupation-like structure is the nature of gameplay itself, not just its integration into daily life.
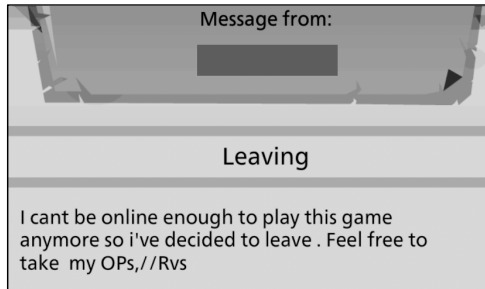
Image 8: A dedicated member of DTS Titanium retiring from Empire after having reached the maximum level and donating her virtual properties (outposts [OPs] and resource villages [RVs]) to her alliance members.

Certain tasks, such as repairing damage caused by attacks, can get quite repetitive: "ten to fifteen minutes just clicking and that's when it becomes not a game, I'm just clicking to get these fires out just so I can stay alive a little bit longer," (Weasley, May, 2016). Even completing the in-game events, while originally meant to be an enjoyable activity, can result in feeling like work for achievement-oriented players: "You have to complete these events. It's a job task" (6eyes, January, 2017). For the few observed who cannot put up with the stresses of repetitive play and the need to be constantly online, quitting is the only option. During the 18-months, a number of players gave into the pressures experienced from Empire's method of daily incorporation and quit, forgoing their virtual property and riches amassed along the way (see Image 8).

5.4.2.1. Like Work but not Quite: Prioritizing Other Obligations

Nevertheless, one aspect that differentiates Empire gameplay and integration from work is that unlike work, most of the time social obligations take precedence over the game. Usually, individuals have specific working hours, regardless of their other social obligations, be these related to friends or family (emergency situations are exceptions, of course). Empire, on the other hand, can be played anytime and anywhere. Hence, it is simple for players to prioritize gameplay over other social obligations, especially given that unlike most occupations, there is no allocated site or hours for the game. However, this does not seem to be the case with most players observed, as most had their own ways of self-regulating their play.

With both the players interviewed and those observed in the game environment, it was evident that they prioritized social obligations over gameplay. This was primarily seen through various changes in their gaming behavior, as well as explicit statements explaining their absences, such as time away from the keyboard to take care of something for the kids, or days away from the game for holidays and family visits. What most of these practices have in common is that they are all transformations in the way Empire is

integrated into an individual's routine on a daily basis. The changes can arise for a variety of reasons, but all are related to social obligations, such as special holidays (Christmas and New Year's). During these holidays, even when people do not take a dedicated break from the game, the routine of the alliance also changes, with fewer people logging on and talking in alliance chat, and decreased social activity overall. This again gives rise to the work/Empire gameplay comparisons: when one takes a break from one activity, then one would ideally also take a break from the other. "Try not to play to much when on holiday as Mrs. X gets upset. Also need a break sometimes from gaming," (Mr.X, January, 2017). This could be because both activities are alike, or because the routines are so closely interlinked that players are more expected to access Empire when they are behind their computer screens at work, or during school hours. Therefore, when the holidays come around, this sort of daily integration is reduced or not as desirable.

Empire routines are so ingrained in the daily lives of their players that it was quite common to see players in the alliance send out mass-messages to everyone about elongated absences. These messages detail changes in individual schedules and how players are entrusting care of their property during their absence (see Image 9), which again likens the comparison between gameplay and work, where holidays have to be properly scheduled and an individual's remaining responsibilities delegated to others.

Message from:

Holiday

i am going away on holiday for the xmas break so i wont be back online until the 3rd of Jan.

The dove will be on for 7 days and i have enuogh resources to cope after then

Have a great xmas all
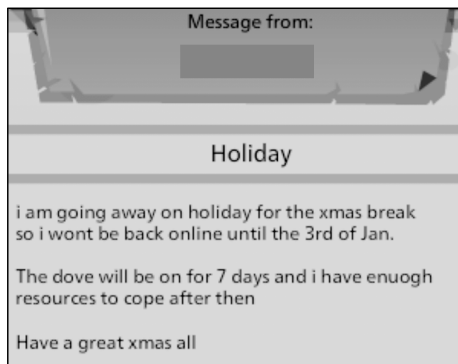
Image 9: Private message sent to the entire alliance by a member before taking a break from his routine. The dove of peace denotes that he cannot be attacked, and his teammates do not need to assist in defending him.

Changes in work routine are also likely to cause a transformation in the daily incorporation of Empire. Weekends are one example, where players usually alter their normal daily integration of the game, either increasing or decreasing their playing time based on prior commitments. Pott discusses in detail the times when his regular Empire schedule changes:

> Weekends can be more [playing time], and this time of year when weather is bad it can be more. Some days of the week I have meetings. Like Tuesday I help run a Cubs pack, and also have some responsibilities at the local church which takes up extra evenings on a Sunday (January, 2017).

It can be noted from Pott's statements that not only is his Empire schedule reactive to his work schedule (changes on weekends, etc.) but it also varies during the week based on social obligations. For most players, social obligations do in fact take precedence over Empire gameplay. This is was observed to be particularly true for players who have children or grandchildren of their own:

> The only rule I have is that I will not play the game […] at the disadvantage of my family. So, my daughter is just back from university for the Christmas time, so I'd rather spend time with her than arguing with BSK alliance about somebody's RV. If she wants to do something, I'll put the game off (6eyes, January, 2017).

6eyes notes that he makes special considerations for his daughter, turning off the game if she would like to join him for some sort of activity. Eek, on the other hand, does not start up the game at all, stating that his "grandkids are a priority," and that he tends "not to play when they are around," (January, 2017). This was the only real strict rule Eek has when it came to his Empire gameplay.

Almost all players observed in the study made special considerations for family and other social obligations, putting the game aside for these specific occasions. However, there were still exceptions to the rule. One player interviewed, and surely others playing Empire, expressed how he prioritizes the game over almost all other responsibilities, be they financial or social: "I play when I am with the grand kids, and they sit on my knee and watch and ask questions about what I'm doing," (Lowlander, January, 2017). Lowlander also states that he does not have a wife, so he does not have to answer to anyone about his spending. Also, as a business owner, he is able to play in his own office, and that he has "even played it in my car when I'm online somewhere," (ibid).

Nevertheless, this preference of the game over other aspects of life can result in undesirable consequences. One obvious example of this was an observation made during a late-night gaming session when an alliance member of DTS Titanium expressed in a sincere outburst how his previous addiction to Empire resulted in his divorce and the loss of his children (see Image 10). He continued to plead with other alliance members not to make the same mistakes he made, reminding everyone of the fictional and virtual nature of the game.

While real world social obligations have proven important for Empire players, so are in-game ones. For most longtime players, socializing or establishing casual online relationships in the game has a great deal of importance. Even when these bonds between

players might appear shallow, only based on sharing mutual benefits, they are still help-ful in teaching certain things, passing on unspoken rules, or even being used as lever-age in certain situations.
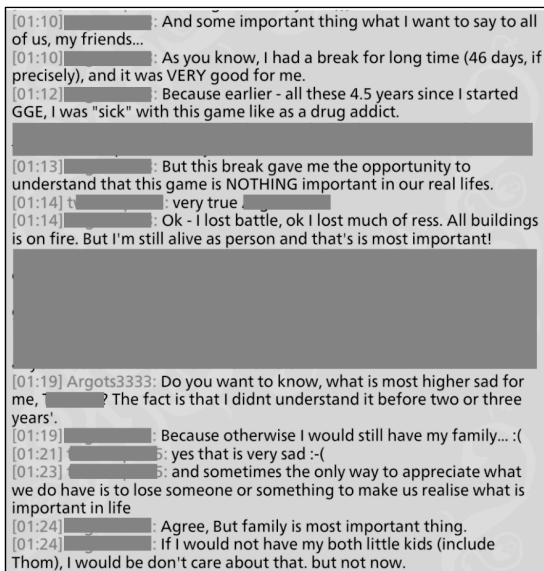

Image 10: Late night confessions from an alliance member about reorganizing his life's priorities.

5.4.3. Socializing in Empire

Social bonds in Empire might not be as amiable as in other multiplayer games, and friendships might be built on mutual benefits (see Subchapter 5.3.2.2) but still, during the ethnography it was observable that the F2P model makes socialization both a bene-ficial practice and a monetization tactic. This makes socialization an important phenom-enon with numerous key functions, serving both the players and the developers, and therefore, the overall community.

5.4.3.1.   *Rewarding Socialization and Socializing as Play*

Goodgame Studios implements several mechanics in Empire to reward socialization in the form of communication between players. These are similar to the social capital dark patterns mentioned by Zagal et al. (2013). However, in contrast to these dark patterns they do not attempt to incentivize microtransactions, instead rewarding the player with premium currency for completing social actions in-game. For example, players are giv-en daily tasks to complete and once completed they receive a minor amount of premium currency (100 rubies at the time of the ethnography). Some of these daily tasks include communicating in alliance chat and sending resources to your neighbors (see Image 9).

While interviewed employees did not comment on this specific feature, GGS could have possibly implemented these tasks to counteract the divide between user groups, or to ensure that the community remain active.

Nevertheless, players do not always play by the rules and sometimes do the bare minimum just to complete these daily tasks, fulfilling them and collecting the premium currency. Several players, for example, will only type a single letter into alliance chat, or will send meager resources to their neighbors, such as one single unit of food or lumber. Hence, players appropriate these daily tasks in a way that suits their need for premium currency, forgoing their intended purpose.

It is unknown why GGS attempts to boost socialization through these mechanics, because socializing remains one of the most evident practices observed in Empire. Even though Empire is a strategy game, throughout the 18-months, most conversation in alliance chat revolved around social matters. These conversations seldom delved into deep topics, and were mostly casual banter about how peoples' days went or what they had planned; the topic of strategy never came up unless there was imminent danger. Strategic exchanges were only made in alliance chat when planning defenses during incoming attacks, but general discussion of game mechanics or in-game events happened intermittently compared to other social chitchat. Some legendary level players (the most advanced stage), who seemed very socially active and involved in the alliance, had not even experienced all the in-game events, supporting the notion that socializing seemed to be the most common play-motivation for many Empire gamers. Other players interviewed stated that their saddest moments in Empire were when other players quit (Eek, January, 2017), while 6eyes stated that his greatest in-game annoyance comes from having to mediate social tension between his members: "Frustrating moments are always [sic] being conflict between players because ultimately in my position, I have to decide what to do with them," (January, 2017).

It can then be concluded that socializing with members of your group, regardless of how closely you identify with them, seems to be a main activity in Empire, one that results in both positive and negative emotions in its gamers. This can possibly be attributed to the play-to-win nature of the game. When individuals detect the aggressive monetization of the game and the need for constant spending, they reprioritize their in-game goals to be more in line with their spending budgets, preferring to focus on other attributes of the game than player-versus-player competition. Gul'dan, the Empire game expert, highlights this exact thought process:

> I was focusing on other stuff, like more connections to the players, like community focused. I liked the people, I talked to them, they were buddies you know. Not trying to beat everyone, yeah. So actually, this pay to win pushed me for more PvE oriented style than PvP (May, 2016).

Image 9: Daily task panel displaying the number of tasks to be completed. On display: the 'Articulate' task for communicating in alliance chat.

However, the socialization focus of Empire can manifest both positively and negatively. Negative examples of Empire's social gameplay include bullying, scare tactics, social espionage and backstabbing. Players will roleplay these activities seriously and relentlessly harass players with messages and attacks. Using these scare tactics might be characteristic of the wartime game genre, however real social backstabbing is not. A common Empire practice, players will usually share their passwords within the alliance to allow them to access each other's account in the events of an attack, when one player is not able to log on. Sometimes players will use this privileged access to delete others' property or even change passwords and steal the other player's account: "People deleting things from other people's accounts and stuff like that when they fall out from each other. Yeah, there's a lot of internal affairs drama going on," (Arcanine, May, 2016).

Nevertheless, the benefits to socializing with others in Empire are also abundant. In one of the rare cases where strategy is discussed in-game, it is within the context of teaching novice members details about attacking or defending. This is usually done through mass-private messages and after a severe loss has been incurred by one of the alliance members. Teaching as a form of socialization could possibly be attributed to the lack of official and unofficial user-generated resources on the game. While these resources do exist, they are not as abundant or easily located as in other games. Hence social learning is quite common, at least for members of DTS titanium. One other common benefit of socializing with others in Empire is getting a helping hand from alliance members who might be heavier spenders.

5.4.3.3.   We Don't Do That Here: Social Rules in Empire

In addition to fairplay rules, there are a few undocumented rules that one must learn through time spent in the community. Some of these are regarding conduct, while others have to do with ways and topics of communication. Eighteen months spent in the Empire community is still not enough time to have noted all the unspoken social rules, however two notable cases are worth mentioning since they relate to the F2P nature of the game and its other contexts.

Initially, one rule that was easily observable and quick to be learned is that one does not talk about the purchasing or spending of premium currency in-game. This does not mean that no talk of premium currency occurs: certainly some mention of it does occur, where people recommend certain tools or upgrades over others. However, some things should never be explicitly discussed, such as the pay-status of an individual, how much they purchase, or how much they spend in a given month. Any attempts to instigate such conversation in alliance chat will most likely be ignored. Some interviewed players have stated that they will not even advise others on how to spend their own rubies, preferring to "leave it to others to make their own choices," (Mr. X, January, 2017). Arcanine highlights the reason behind this secrecy is that while some paying users attempt to establish their elite status with their spending, others prefer to remain part of the masses, without attracting too much attention:

> They'll never tell anyone about their spending habits or how much they spend because they know that they will be shunned by the rest of the community both in the game and online, on the forums […] because everybody sees them like, oh you know, you're the one feeding the problem basically. (January, 2017).

Another set of social rules one must pick up on tackles how alliances tailor fairplay and GGS' official rules. For example, as stated earlier, having multiple accounts and engaging in account sharing are deemed unacceptable by both GGS and fairplay rules. However, most alliances (DTS Titanium included) do in fact commit this violation, having both multiple accounts per user in the alliance and sharing accounts between them. Still, even when committing these infractions, they impose certain rules to try and maintain some order or avoid liability. Therefore, they will not openly discuss in alliance chat the fact that they have multiple accounts, or that they share passwords to support each other.

Unspoken rules like those mentioned here are not the only real world-like processes observed in Empire. There are a number of other practices from the real world mirrored in the digital game, possibly more than in other games with traditional payment models. This could possibly be attributed to the various contextual transformations brought on by

the F2P business model. This real-world mirroring will be discussed in detail in the following section.

5.4.4. Clashing Realities: Transfer Processes and Appropriation in Empire

Fritz's (2006) transfer model attempts to explain video game usage through detailing a transmission process that happens between the cognitively separate virtual and real worlds. This occurs on various levels, such as metaphors, texts, control or even facts, and players select their games with some knowledge of the transfer process in mind. This is why individuals prefer games where they can maintain some form of power, sovereignty and control, otherwise known as structural coupling (Fritz, 2003). Fritz's transfer model explains a cognitive process, which would be more appropriate in identification, not the appropriation processes of players. However, the transfer model is still relevant to the context of appropriation for two distinct reasons. Firstly, this transfer model can explain a player's motivations in Empire and why certain players bully others, become elitist and so on. These motivations could be primarily attributed to their quest for sovereignty, power and control (see 5.4.4.2). Players' motivations, while originally cognitive processes, have an influence on their appropriation practices, therefore making the transfer model a good fit for this context.

Secondly, another process which occurs in Empire, mainly due to the freemium payment model, can also be likened to the transfer process described by Fritz (2006). This process, which is labelled in this study as 'Real-World Mirroring', is when processes in the in-game virtual world mimic those of the real-world. While this possibly occurs in games with traditional, pay-to-play payment models as well, what is alluded to in this sort of mirroring are negative real-world practices which should ideally be left out of fictional worlds and the magic circle. It is assumed that this process is more common in F2P games than those with traditional, pay-to-play payment models.

5.4.4.1.   It's All Too Real: Mirroring the Real-World in Empire

Several mechanics employed in Empire result in social and gameplay phenomena that are clearly distinct from traditional pay-to-play games. These occurrences, such as a sharp divide and resentment between those who pay and those who do not, or the concept of paying to win, all contribute to establishing certain player hierarchies within the game. Unlike traditional pay-to-play games, in Empire and possibly other aggressively monetized F2P games which push a P2W model, player hierarchies are usually based on player spending. These hierarchies could be indicative of real-world aspects, such as financial income and other socioeconomic factors.

Concrete examples of how real-world socioeconomic factors translate in-game include the way that the individuals who are at the top of the ladders in Empire are also successful in the real world. This is a prime example of the virtual world mimicking the real

world. Arcanine, who is in close contact with players on the forums and through the ticketing system, notes that the best players in the game are almost always entrepreneurs with plenty of financial resources and time to invest:

> Most successful guys are business owners. People that basically sit in their offices all day and they play while they're at work because they don't have too much to do at the time and they have a lot of money to spend, or the wives of these guys too (May, 2016).

Buying success is the root cause of these player hierarchies in Empire which mimic real-world socioeconomic inequalities. In games with traditional payment models, however, hierarchies are usually based on players' skills:

> I think it's become like a football division. That you have 4 big alliances, which are going to win everything, because they have the money to buy the players, etc. Then you have the rest […] it's taken some of the skill out of the game. Because you can buy success. And I know players that have done that. In the old days it was much more based on strategy, a lot more even (6eyes, January, 2017).

Arcanine states that in other F2P games he has played, which are not aggressively monetized (not P2W), the hierarchies are based on skill and therefore respect is based on that factor. This is turn leads to less fear from leaders of the top of the food chain:

> They like the advice and respect these guys, whereas in our game it's has more to do with the fact that they are the leaders of these groups and the groups of the guys that run the game […] cause you know that the guys that are at the top, you mess with them in any way shape or form, then you're destroyed. You're gone," (May, 2016).

In addition to fear, these sorts of hierarchy lead to the oppression of lower-paying and non-paying users, who are deemed non-competitive and kept from joining alliances. Sometimes when they are considered for membership, lower paying or non-paying users are forced to do grunt work instead. Weasley notes that if paying alliances allow non-paying users in, they will only do so under specific circumstances, such as letting non-paying users grind for them, mimicking another real-world practice (labor exploitation) in Empire (Weasley, May, 2016). Moreover, the existence of premium currency, which is equated with real-world currency, allows for practices which again might not exist in pay-to-play games, such as extortion and bullying. In Empire, individuals may go through periods of being constantly attacked and assaulted until they have provided their opponent with sufficient premium tools or gifts (Lara, May, 2016).

These hierarchies, which are only present in F2P games, or those with microtransactions, tend to mimic real-life inequalities and class divisions, detracting from the half-real (Juul, 2005) nature, or fictional escape, that digital games tend to pro-

vide. This state of gaming can be considered to be a state of "hyperreality" as character-ized by Baudrillard (1993), where there is no distinction between the real and unreal (Crawford and Rutter, 2006, p.159). One great example of this is that players will usual-ly calculate the price of their in-game attacks using real-world value, not premium cur-rency. They consider launching attacks for €20-30, instead of the equivalent in rubies (Arcanine & Weasley, May, 2016).

Tying in-game content to holidays also blurs the distinction between the virtual and the real world. This might include offers for premium currency on Black Friday and Christ-mas, or providing holiday in-game items and events which mimic the real world, such as the decorative beer cart that appeared during the Oktoberfest event, or Halloween-themed attack and defense tools. These contribute to a state of hyperreality, where the unreal and fictional nature of the game becomes less apparent. Hence Empire, like oth-er F2P games, might function as "a wider reflection of society," (Lara, May, 2016), not just in its ability to mirror social processes, but also through providing virtual adoptions of real-world cultural and social artifacts.

5.4.4.2.   *It's Just You in Pixels: Transferring Motivations in Empire*

Whether it reflects the real world, or is a unique manifestation of F2P game culture, Empire does result in distinctive player hierarchies, which might be seen in other ag-gressively monetized F2P games, and results in antisocial behavior from players. Ac-tions such as bullying, extortion or elitism are all quite common, and in certain circles, or when dealing with certain non-paying players, also entirely acceptable. However, the payment model cannot be the only factor that contributes to these actions. Surely, play-ers have a choice in how to behave and are not under the control of circumstances and the game environment. Therefore, Fritz's transfer model (2006) is ideal in articulating how players' real-life motivations can also be a source of antisocial behavior in Empire:

> I think people are individuals, as in real life when you look at the people you work
> with, each one has a character, some are more prone to moaning and some are
> more prone to bullying and I think that applies regardless on if they spend on rubies
> or not (6eyes, January, 2017).

Fritz (2006) notes in his model that a transfer process occurs between the cognitive state of the real and virtual worlds, and that players are somewhat aware of this pro-cess, which makes them able to pick games that support their own play motivations. In a basic sense, this means that players can choose games that help fulfil their need for control, achievement or relaxation. However, in Empire this can also apply to antisocial behaviors, such as bullying and elitism:

> There are people that think they're better than you and when these people play the
> game, they don't change their attitude and bring the attitude with them to the game,

it's not the game making them elitist, it's just them. They bring that attitude to the game (6eyes, January, 2017).

While what 6eyes states might not apply to all individuals playing Empire, it does to some. In that sense, the payment model might promote antisocial behavior, driving elitism and inequality and mirroring certain harsh realities that would ideally be omitted from a fictional setting and the magic circle. However, it is difficult to restrict individual attitudes, and people bring their own motivations from the outside world to the game, determining their own gameplay behavior.

Finally, it is important to note that on the surface Empire, like other F2P games, may appeal to non-paying users who can access the core software for free. However, in the long run, those who remain in the community and thrive on the payment-driven hierarchies, are the heavier spending users. For these players, and true to Fritz's transfer model (2006), which dictates that players will prefer games where they have sovereignty and control (Fritz and Fehr, 1997), Empire provides an aspect of control they might have in real life, which can be reflected in the virtual world regardless of gaming skill: "It's actually very interesting, a lot of our VIP players […] they are rich in real life and for them it's a control thing, a power thing and they enjoy it and they get a lot of pleasure out of it," (Lara, May, 2016). Therefore, it can be seen that Empire, and possibly other P2W games, provides individuals who have enough financial resources with a sense of control. This sense of control motivates further play and involvement in the community, regardless of actual gameplay skills.

5.5. Representation

The context of representation deals with the depiction of Empire in public discourse and media, as well as the representation of themes within the game itself. In this study, it was noted that the F2P model transforms both types of representation concerning Empire. The freemium model transforms the out-of-game representation, or how the game is received in mainstream media and discussed in public discourse, as well as the portrayal of certain aspects within the game itself. Representation within Empire appears to be overly commercialized, loaded with irritating and sometimes false advertisements. Due to the game's aggressive monetization and lack of community endorsement, the depiction of Empire and GGS in public discourse and mainstream media also seems rather negative.

5.5.1. Aspect Depiction in Empire

Initially, the F2P model appears to transform how certain features are depicted in Empire itself. These representations tend to provide continuous and sometimes false advertisement of content. Recycling content, falsely marketing it as "new", and glorifying leading players (who, as previously discussed, are likely to be players who pay) all hints at an apparently commercial experience.

5.5.1.1.   (Fake) Ads and Marketing: Commercialized Representation in Empire

One aspect that best communicates the excessively commercial representation and consumer experience in Empire is the copious amount of in-game advertising and 'sales' on premium currency. Throughout a regular gaming session in Empire, a player will experience multiple ads for in-game items (and currency) in various forms. Advertisements will pop-up as soon as a player logs in to their account, and these have to be closed individually, making them reminiscent of annoying pop-up browser advertisements. Once all these windows have been closed, smaller icons will remain at the bottom of the screen to remind players of the offers available (see Image 10). Also, idling or tabbing out of the game will result in more pop-ups appearing on the screen. Moreover, players will receive offers and advertising through their in-game messaging system, as well as their real-world email. Offers cannot be deleted from the in-game mail until they have been read first, unlike messages from players that can be directly removed without needing to be opened. This constant in-game advertising and the persistent bombarding of players can be somewhat ethically questionable, especially since the user is not able to avoid them. However, even aside from ethical considerations, these advertisements definitely do decrease user enjoyment of the experience, rendering the game more unpleasant, commercial and not as polished as console games. This transformation in game experience due to repetitive, irritating advertising has been noted for MMO games, especially when transferring to the F2P model:

A lot changes when an MMO goes free-to-play. Suddenly a relatively clean user interface is defaced with flashing reminders that there's stuff to buy. Many a rich fantasy world has been cheapened by pop-up advertisements for loot box sales and other special offers (Fahey, 2018).

Image 10: Icons remaining on screen advertising offers and sales. These icons will remain there for the entire game and cannot be removed, even after purchasing the offer.

Perhaps what is a greater indication of the commercialized nature of the game, and representations within it, is that a large number of the advertising present in Empire is misleading, or just false. The marketing of items for sale in Empire is often done through stressing their functional nature. This is even done for decorative items which might not have any functional benefit:

> There was always a small thing that was meant to make you think that your gameplay will be improved by having this, even if it was a flag that didn't do anything. It was just a flag, it was still described as "with this flag, because you will be one of the few people who has it on the map, your visibility will improve" or something, so you'll be more noticeable and then you're more important on the map. So even though some of them don't have a functionality, they are still sold as having the least tiny bit of functionality (Zelda, May, 2016).

GGS markets items as such because it understands that the majority of players are now accustomed to a P2W environment: "If you offer anything that's going to give them an advantage in the game, they eat it up," (Weasley, May, 2016). Moreover, GGS utilizes timers on its offers to incentivize spending. Offers appear on screen for the players with a specific timer, and once the timer is gone the offer goes too. Employees interviewed noted that these timers are just arbitrary to incentivize spending, and were based on

previous testing conducted in the community between their users to determine how they would respond: "We've done AB tests about how it affects purchasing if there's a timer or if there isn't a timer" (Lara, May, 2016). Finally, GGS also sends emails to players making fabricated claims, informing them for example to access their account for a reward, which then turns out to be the same one they received by completing their daily tasks.

Adding to the false nature of these advertisements, in addition to arbitrary timers, several offers will have the real-money value equivalent of the offer advertised to them (see Image 11). This contributes to the state of hyperreality brought on by other components of the game (see Subchapter 5.4.4.1), reducing the fictional element. Advertising using the real-world value of offers is also negative, misleading players because virtual items (including the property in Empire) do not have an established real-world value, and their worth is determined by the company at will. Hence, the value advertised is the result of an arbitrary calculation, used for marketing purposes to incentivize spending.

Image 11: In-game offer advertising its worth using real-world value determined by GGS.

Furthermore, while not strictly false advertising, it is still quite questionable that the content Empire is always marketing as fresh, new and recently developed is in reality the same content that has been used many times before, repurposed with a new narrative or graphics. GGS' approach to Empire is to market its overflowing features and content, stressing the existence of countless in-game events, buildings and troops. However, in reality, most in-game events and competitions are virtually carbon copies of each other, providing the same experience, with only minor differences in rewards or graphics. The best example for this sort of content repurposing is the Blood Crows event. Blood Crows was a newly introduced event during the time of the ethnography, and it is extremely similar to the Foreign Lords event. The two events function in almost exactly the same

way, to the extent that even GGS employees attest that the Blood Crows is just a recy-cled version of the same event (see Image 12).

[09:15]	: morning
[09:31]	um what's a bloodcrow lord?
[09:40]	: It's a foreign lord with a fancy new name

Image 12: In-game discussion of the Blood Crow event in an employee only alliance that the re-searcher was allowed access of briefly.

5.5.1.2.   *Spend Big to Win Big: Player Glorification and Price Justification*

GGS uses various (and sometimes questionable) advertising and marketing strategies for its item microtransactions and premium currency, because the price tags on these items are simply too high. All employees interviewed have stated that they have had to justify the price of in-game items to the players through emails and tickets (Arcanine, Lara & Weasley, May, 2016). Sometimes, there will even be official company state-ments regarding the price of items, which are placed on the forums to assist customer support agents and community managers in their communication:

> Whenever there was something big that happened and people were complaining about high price[s] there was always quite fast […] a company statement and I feel like these things were more addressed on the boards than the tickets or if they came to us in the ticket and we already had a company response we used that or send [the players] to the forum, (Zelda, May, 2016).

In addition to justifying the value of items through their functionality, which is how almost all purchasable items are advertised, employees would stress the exclusivity and strength of the items. According to Arcanine, they would normally state that the more expensive an item is, the more powerful it is, and the less likely it is that others would have it, praying on the dominant P2W mentality in the community (May, 2016).

Possibly what reinforces the P2W mentality in the community is the way winning players are depicted in-game. In addition to regular rankings and ladders, which are also pre-sent in other F2P and traditional payment games, winners in Empire are usually adver-tised to others in a similar manner to offers and sales. When logging into the game, grand winners of tournaments and competitions are usually presented to other players through pop-ups (see Image 13), imposing a sense of rivalry on all other users, regard-less of their own motivations for playing the game.

The depiction of players in this manner, coupled with the way in-game prices are justi-fied, and the abundance of in-game advertising and disingenuous marketing, highlights GGS' intentions with Empire. Instead of being focused on growing the community, the emphasis placed on P2W elements makes it clear that the company is solely fixated on profit, catering heavily to paying players and ensuring their continued patronage. This

approach, however, is easy to see through and could possibly be the main contributing factor to the negative image Empire appears to have garnered in mainstream media and public discourse.

Image 13: In-game announcement of the winning alliance of a specific server. This message appears to all users regardless of their participation in the event.

5.5.2. Empire in Media and Public Discourse

Empire and Goodgame Studio's negative image in mainstream media and public discourse can be attributed to several factors, such as their P2W approach to the game, the company's disregard for the game community, and even how GGS treats its own employees. It appears that the company's negative image persists irrespective of its efforts to counter this in the media through official communication or even progressive changes to the game.

5.5.2.1.   *Image Improvement Efforts: Goodgame's Official Communication*

Goodgame Studio's official communication, consisting of press statements from the company, and interviews with online and print publications by senior managers and the CEO, all attempt to spread a sanitized image of both the game and company through hyperbolic claims. One such statement was made in a public LinkedIn article posted by the senior vice president, where he quotes the manager of the Empire studio (Nina Mueller), who declares Empire to be "one of the most complex strategy games ever" (Abrar, 2017). While Empire certainly provides an opportunity for complicated gameplay, it can hardly be called one of the most complex strategy games ever, especially when compared to competitive RTS games such as Starcraft, Warcraft or Command and Conquer.

Official communication coming from GGS also makes similar inflated statements about the company itself. Most declarations made concerning GGS in public outlets attempt to overstate the company's immense success. On its own website, the company labels itself "Germany's leading developer and publisher of gaming software," (Goodgame Studios, n.d), while the CEOs state in an article for Venturebeat that they are competing on a global scale, with companies such as Activision and Ubisoft (Takahashi, 2015). Most communication made on GGS' own website, or through statements of top-level management in other publications, attempts to stress business success, using facts and figures when possible (see Image 14). This communication approach emphasizes the commercial business strategy of the company, and its focus on profit, not the production of innovative games or fostering communities.
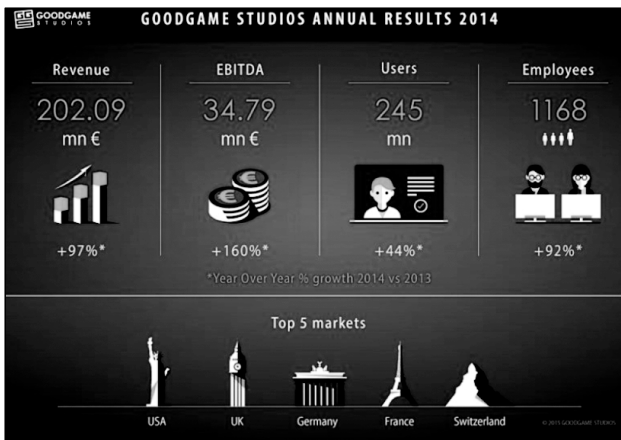
Image 14: Infographic communicating business growth and success of GGS studios. Used on their own website and published in other articles.

While claims of success made by GGS could possibly be true, the company also makes other statements that are not as honest, in hopes of improving its public image. One tactic used in representing Empire in media and public discourse (as well as their other games), is marketing the game as free and fair. While the game certainly is free-to-play, it is far from fair for all users playing it, especially given its aggressive monetization and the play-to-win approach. Marketing the game in a way that portrays it as an equal experience for users of all payment classes is dishonest:

> Our game without paying, I think it's nice. The interactions between people are great the problem starts if you want to be in the top and then you won't get it without paying and that's a bit unfair. So it also depends on things like advertising and stuff, if you push this idea "be the greatest" and then the game is not allowing you to get it, that's a bit this grey-area…ok…but if the game is more like "see the world" or "expe-

rience the millions of players playing" "expand your castle" ok you can do it (Gul'dan, May, 2016).

As Gul'dan points out, marketing Empire in a way that emphasizes your ability to achieve and reach the top ranks without payment is an ethical gray area, and arguably an unfair representation of the game. This sort of marketing applies to several other F2P games, which imply an equal experience exists regardless of payment, as per the label "free-to-play."

A change in this sort of promotion would ideally negate the dishonest representation of Empire and similar games, "maybe it would be more fair if it was more in the open. If they were actually more upfront up about it [free-to-play]," (Zelda, May, 2016). Perhaps this is why application platforms like the Apple Store have begun to label these sorts of games as "free" with in-app purchases. While the label is not entirely clear, it still indicates to the user that purchases will probably be necessary during gameplay.

5.5.2.2. A Persistently Negative Image: Unofficial Communication of GGS and Empire

In addition to being stereotyped because of the F2P label, Empire and GGS' public image remains unfavorable irrespective of the official communicational efforts by the company to bolster the image of both itself and the game. Within public discourse, as in discussion among Empire players and within the community itself, GGS' negative image comes from its lack of support for the community and its somewhat questionable customer service procedures: "Goodgames has quite a bad image in that aspect. We're definitely not known for our customer service or community recognition," (Weasley, May, 2016). The lack of community recognition is mainly attributed to how the company handles its customer operations, but also stems from its data-driven development approach (Shokrizade, 2017), which ignores feedback and requests from the community, relying instead on gathered data. Furthermore, the game and the company's negative image in the community can also be attributed to the divide between pay and non-pay users, and how again this is reflected in customer management:

> We do have a bad company image. You know people notice it [difference in user treatment], people are upset by it and say a non-pay and a VIP user have exactly the same problem […] the VIP user gets the stuff back. If he made a mistake in a purchase, he'll get the stuff back and maybe might even get something more, you never know, depending on how generous the support person is feeling. Non-pay users won't get a thing back, won't get anything extra either, (Lara, May, 2016).

This sort of differentiation is now visible to the community and indicates the commercial intentions of GGS with Empire (see Image 15), especially given the company's approach of catering more to the heavier paying users.

Image 15: Alliance conversation about how an in-game event is tipped towards heavier spending users.

While players understand that the company needs to generate income to be able to provide content and maintain the game, they still feel that the aggressive monetization approach of Empire is too severe: "They understand that money is got to be involved somewhere and they're really sort of open to it at the moment, unless it goes too far," (Arcanine, May, 2016). The divide and differentiation in user management (with heavier spenders getting markedly preferential treatment) makes it clear to players that GGS is profit-centered, and this is why the dominant opinion in the gaming community is that GGS is 'money-grabbing'. Eek identifies this mindset when arguing that Empire is not a P2W game: "[Its] more of a pay to play strategy - they [sic] not bothered if you win or lose as long as they can get you to pay," (January, 2017). Tipping the scales towards heavier spenders, as well as this dominant mindset that the company only cares about profit and not the community itself, leads to a lack of trust from players: "We're creating part of the community that it's like no-trust and ok I play your game because I like it but the whole company is evil," (Gul'dan, May, 2016).

Goodgame Studios' unfavorable image and the bad will it generates are so severe that players regularly send physical hate mail to its headquarters in Hamburg, not only virtual complaints through tickets and comments on social media. Lara, states that some frustrated players have even expressed discontent in unusual ways:

> We even had elephant dung the was sent to our offices […] there's a website you can do it. Where you can have it sent. I think they were like five boxes of elephant shit that got sent, and I'm pretty sure that all the alliance chipped in to send this to us (May, 2016).

However, GGS' negative image is not only common among players of Empire, but also employees of the company itself. Among those interviewed, this unfavorable image grew from their knowledge of some unethical customer operations practices, such as the ticket queue system, or AB tests. Also, the employees who identified as gamers had problems with the level of quality provided by the company: "Quality has just got worse and worse and worse because it doesn't matter. Once people are hooked on the game, and once people are into it and they're spending their money, it really doesn't matter," (Arcanine, May, 2016).

> ▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓ too bad in the 5 years your Customer service went down the Toilet, sad you used to care about your players.
>
> Gefällt mir · Antworten · 16 Std.

Image 16: Facebook comment on and Empire post celebrating its fifth birthday.

One additional reason as to why the image of GGS is unfavorable among employees (as well as others within the gaming industry in Germany and worldwide), is due to the way they handled their staff contracts. On two separate occasions, GGS terminated approximately 200 employees in the company by making them redundant. In addition to angering several workers who lost their jobs, or were offered exit packages if they had been on permanent contracts, the move received plenty of negative attention in the games' industry and German press. GGS' approach to downsizing was heavily critiqued by Hansjörg Schmidt, the SPD member of Hamburg's parliament in 2016, as well as the United Service Trade Union a year earlier ("Goodgame Studios: Hunderte Verlieren Job", 2016). These questionable business practices used on the company's own workforce and customers has contributed to the negative image of both Empire and GGS in public discourse and mainstream media.

To this day, Empire and GGS' image remains an unfavorable one, regardless of attempts by the company to convey a better appearance and address user critiques. Later official communication from GGS stresses its attempts to cater to the community (Abrar, 2017). These claims all seem to be supported by recent changes made to Empire. While not changing the P2W approach, certain features have been altered to better accommodate non-paying users, such as decreasing the amount of dark design patterns which incentivize spending. For example, the game now allows users the option to queue more soldiers, and rewards items that allow the user to skip long waiting times. These changes all hint at a less aggressive monetization approach. However, irrespective of these changes, the established undesirable image of both Empire and GGS is hard to correct, possibly due to associations with the F2P label, or the Empire community's previous experiences with the game and its developer. The assumption is that once a game and a company's reputation have been established in the community, there is little the company can do to change its image later on. While this dilemma might appear unique to Empire and GGS, it has been also observed with other developers, such as Electronic Arts (EA), who have earned a similar reputation due to their in-game microtransactions, and have become the archetype of abysmal monetization practices in the games industry (Campbell, 2018).

5.6.   Wrapping-up Contextual Transformations

5.6.1. Two Types of Codes: A Framework for the Study of Media Cultures

When answering RQ1, or how the F2P model transforms the various contexts of Empire's gaming culture, an unexpected benefit was also realized concerning the actual methodological framework used in coding the material. It could be spotted that there were two specific types of codes developed in coding the ethnographic data (field notes, interviews and articles): identification codes and transformation codes. Identification codes are those which categorize certain phenomena, practices or actions as significant markers of game culture, such as the codes adopted from Shaw's (2013) framework to assist in detecting those who identify as gamers (gaming usage, self-identification, community involvement, etc.). Transformation codes, on the other hand, are those which pinpoint practices that are different in F2P games than in games with traditional payment models, such as temporal or monetary dark patterns, social rules, or play as social interaction.

Furthermore, it was observed that some codes functioned as both identifiers and transformers, such as the code for user-generated content (UGC). This code which looked for instances, manifestation, depth, quality and acceptance of UGC by players within the community can function as both types of codes because merely having UGC in the community already serves to identify the community as a game culture, one that features the act of producing rich cultural art, fiction and scholarship situated around the game product. The other function of this code lies in assessing the amount, quality, depth and context of the UGC in the community, which then indicates the transformative process. It should be noted that this type of code, as well as the separate identification and transformation ones, are multilevel, addressing practices on the micro, meso and macro level.

In this analysis, special attention was given to transformation codes and the transformative properties of codes which appeared as both identifiers and transformers. The reason for this approach is that the game culture to be analyzed in the study, Empire's game culture, its community, online locations and specific boundaries, had already been previously established according to the Elmezeny & Wimmer (2018) framework for defining game cultures. Therefore, there was no specific need to further emphasize identification codes to detect the presence of the specific game culture, and instead focus is given to the transformative process of the free-to-play payment model. Nevertheless, some stress was given to identification codes when dealing with individuals who play the game (identification context). In this situation, identifier codes were also used to categorize the membership of individuals as part of the culture, or their 'gamer identity', in an attempt to relate their opinions or explain their actions concerning other phenomena

taking place in the community, such as the GGS' production or regulation practices. This was also conducted because membership of game culture, or identification as a gamer, is an intricate process that needs to be dealt with on an individual basis, and each instance had to be separately coded for each participant.

Furthermore, identification and transformation codes also interact with each other. In doing so, novel phenomena or transformations can appear in the data. For example, by using identification codes to look at gamer identity, which signals membership of the game culture, and looking at how this interacts with normal game culture practices, such as the regulation or production practices of GGS, we generate new transformative phenomena to be coded. These findings, entitled 'gamer identity negotiations', examined several occurrences, where the degree to which an individual identifies as a gamer (non-gamer, casual, hardcore) influences various aspects: from their outlook on certain company practices to their own behavior within the game, e.g. spending or value attachment.

For future researchers and academics interested in the ethnography of game and media cultures, or even other methodological approaches of studying media cultures and communities of digital games (e.g. content analysis of interview or focus group data), it would be beneficial to consider this framework utilizing two varieties of codes in the analysis process. Furthermore, this approach can be tailored by researchers based on their own interests and does not need to be applied identically, meaning there is no need for the exact usage of these identifier and transformation codes. Instead, scientists only need to apply identification codes to detect instances of a specific culture, or cultural practices within the sample at certain points, while the second type of code can correspond to whichever phenomenon is of interest to the researcher. The use of 'transformation' codes is only relevant for this research, which attempts to look at changes brought on by the F2P model. For example, scientists concerned with eSports and industry professionalization in game culture can instead focus on identification codes and another self-defined code which indicates professionalization, or the standardization of processes within the game culture. Other researchers interested in phenomena concerning the metaprocess of mediatization, for example, could utilize identification codes and mediatization codes, which indicate the various characteristics and procedures of the metaprocess taking place within their sample.

Nevertheless, for future researchers hoping to investigate game cultures, the application of different types of codes is not sufficient. Researchers should also ideally pay special attention to how the different types of codes (identification and whatever other type they define, relative to their phenomenon) interact, creating new possibilities for observable experiences and practices to be noted. In fact, some of the most interesting findings researchers can arrive at might appear from these interactions, as this intersection indi-

cates a concrete point in the data that results from clear ontological indications (identification of game culture) and phenomenological findings (empirical observations of practices of interest).

Overall, this method of analysis that applies identification codes is beneficial even in light of utilizing existing frameworks which assist in defining the game culture to be analyzed, such as the Elmezeny & Wimmer (2018) approach of defining them on a micro/meso/macro level. In addition to the aforementioned interactions, which lead to more analytical potential, the use of identification codes can also assist the researcher in discovering new or alternative game/media cultures within their data. This was the case in this study when several instances in the ethnographic data of Empire's game culture indicated the existence of a free-to-play meso-level game culture. These observations were only made possible during data analysis and through the use of identification codes, which helped in establishing the boundaries of Empire's game culture, finding commonalities and differences to those of similar games utilizing the F2P payment model (see Chapter 6.0 for more details). Hence, for those interested in the phenomenological analysis of game and media cultures, this coding system will prove to be useful in its application.

5.6.2. Free-to-Play: Transforming Every Context

The previous section showed how the F2P model can transform each context of du Gay et al.'s (1997) circuit of culture (for a summary of transformations, please see Table 10 below). Each previous subchapter has demonstrated that the F2P business model can have both a minor and a major transformative impact on every context of the game and its culture. This ranges from its production and development, to how players use the game, to how they identify with it and even how the game is represented in media and public discourse. Minor transformations brought on by the freemium business model included intensifying already existing practices in the games industry, such as abusing dark design patterns to incentivize microtransactions. However, there were also some major transformations, such as creating a segmented in-game community based on real socioeconomic factors, and assisting real-world practices and motivation transfers into the game and vice versa. These transformations appeared in the previous section as practices that took place within separate contexts; still they are the result of a complex relationship of practices that take place in all the contexts of the circuit of culture. Both these transformations and the process will be thoroughly explained in the next section.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that some transformations observed in the case of Empire are attributed to its aggressive monetization, not to the F2P business model per se. GGS' negative image in the community and mainstream media and the segregated user base or the mirroring of socioeconomic realties could all be attributed to this aggressive monetization and P2W strategy. This means that simply utilizing the F2P mod-

el will not necessarily result in these practices and phenomena emerging in any game. As was noted by multiple interviewees, there are several other F2P games that "do it right", such as Heroes of the Storm and DoTA 2. These are examples of games which might employ microtransactions, but do so primarily for decorative purposes, or ones that endorse their community and its feedback. We can therefore conclude that the abuse of the payment model (aggressive monetization) and gearing the game towards pay-to-win might be the key contributing factors in the propagation of particular practices commonly observed in Empire. Still, this does not necessarily mean that these two phenomena are disconnected. Aggressive monetization and the free-to-play model are in fact quite closely connected, with the former being an undesirable state resulting in more obvious and observable commercialized game practices. The link between these two phenomena and the positive and negative implementation of the F2P model, are further examined in detail in Chapter 6.0.

It is imperative to note once again that some contextual occurrences and practices observed are not entirely separate. Du Gay et al. (1997) note that the contexts of the circuit of culture are not totally distinct, and invariably affect each other. This can be observed through various practices witnessed in the ethnography, where one context transforms the other and results in the aforementioned phenomena, such as the maintenance and production policies of GGS ([re]production context) influencing how players decide on community rules (regulation). Another example is how the game is perceived in mainstream media and public discourse (representation), which is transformed by the company's production and maintenance practices. Some phenomena observed in separate contexts are still the result of several contexts transforming each other, and not just a one-on-one direct relationship. This can be attributed to the complex nature of the circuit of culture (du Gay et al., 1997), where the contexts are continuously taking effect on each other.

The next section will explain and detail the relationships where the contexts of Empire's game culture are transforming each other to assist in manifesting the various practices noted in the previous chapter. Since the act of transformation is not haphazard and can be explained (Hepp, 2015), the following section divides the transformations taking place between the various contexts of Empire's game culture into a number of relationships. This is an attempt at answering the second research question of the study, or *how the contexts of F2P game culture transform each other*.

Table 10: A summary of observable transformations the F2P model has on Empire game culture.

Context	Summary of Transformations
(re)production	• Abuse of dark patterns • Psychological trickery to stimulate antisocial environment • Community fragmentation through service and content delivery (tiered offers)
Regulation	• Community fragmentation through official regulation • Implementation of cooperative community regulation (fairplay)
Identification	• Increased attachment to virtual property • Shame and pride in payment • Identity conflicts with company actions and values (both gamers and employees) • Weaker group identification (acquaintances with benefits) • Fragmented community identity
Appropriation	• Establishment of spending habits and budgeting • Varied play experience based on personal spending • Game experience similar to work • Mirroring socioeconomic realities
Representation	• False marketing to incentivize spending • Cluttered and commercial in-game design • Persistently negative game and company image/reputation

5.7.   Contextual Relationships

In the previous section, the F2P business model's various transformations on each context were discussed in detail. Through this process, it was observed that during certain practices contexts can transform each other, forming some sort of contextual relationship. These relationships come in many forms and manifestations, and can feature as little as two contexts, and as many as five, or the entire circuit of culture. Examples mentioned earlier include: the relationship between questionable development and customer service practices ([re]production) and Empire's image in mainstream media and public discourse (representation). Another example is how fairplay rules instated by players (regulation) have transformed the value and ownership of virtual goods (identification and appropriation). This section will analyze observed contextual relationships in detail, noting first the specific types (or typologies) of relationships observed and then expanding on them, describing their specifics, and how the contexts transform each other, which one can assume to be attributed to the F2P business model.

For a detailed look at which sub-codes from the agenda were utilized to explain each relationship, please refer to Table 7 in Subchapter 4.8. As previously mentioned, codes from the agenda, while dealing with several actors (individuals, groups, etc.) on the micro, meso or macro level all still deal with cultural practices. This level of 'practices' implies that even when codes address particularly varied cultural contexts or actors on different levels, they all note specific practices from within their respective contexts and the specific actors concerned.

While in RQ1 practices were observed on specific levels for most contexts and related to each other, in RQ2, and true to the nature of the circuit of culture, the observed practices from the various contexts of the circuit are on all levels, and are analyzed and related to each other simultaneously. Meaning that individual practices (micro) are related to community and organizational practices (meso) and to those of the culture as a whole (macro). Similar to RQ1, this again is done through the use of themes and sub-themes. However, in RQ2, the contextual relationships function as themes, grouping certain cultural practices across contexts and relating them to each other (see Table 7 in Subchapter 4.8.).

The coding of contextual relationships occurred during the second stage of data analysis. During this stage, which borrows from the ethnography of virtual worlds approach (Boellstorff et al. 2012) and is dubbed thematization and systemization, the codes from the primary stage of data analysis are first grouped to explain certain relationships and the way that cultural contexts interact with and transform one another. In the second step, the relationships are then interpreted using specific literature. For example, several sub-codes are grouped and utilized to explain the relationship between the two contexts of representation and (re)production (*Temporal/Monetary Dark Patterns, Antisocial*

Behavior Mechanics, Psychological Tricks, Tiered Service/Offers, as well as Unofficial Representation of Game/Company and Official Representation of Game/Company). Afterwards, the theory of public esteem (Carroll, 2011) is utilized to provide one possible explanation for the workings behind these contextual transformations, or how the company's practices can damage its image in media and public discourse.

In several parts of the following subchapter, various theories are mentioned to assist in explaining contextual practices and transformations. In doing so, another major criticism of the circuit of culture is addressed, one that views the framework merely as the "circular journey of the commodity itself," (Leve, 2012, p. 4) rather than the various processes of culture. By relating the contextual relationships to theory and a broader social context outside of the circuit itself, one can contextualize the journey of the media commodity and understand these cultural processes.

5.8. Relationship Typologies

Relationships between the contexts of Empire's game culture (and possibly those of other F2P games) are diverse and come in multiple arrangements. Nevertheless, most manifestations have two common aspects: 1) they involve a transformation or interaction between the contexts mentioned in du Gay et al.'s circuit of culture (1997), and 2) transformations between contexts can be single, bidirectional or multidirectional.

These two aspects are the only common feature between all of the possible F2P contextual relationships observed. Most of the other aspects are distinct. From the number of interacting contextual phenomena to the types of transformation taking place, relationships tend to be distinct unless they constitute progressions from one to the other. One other difference between relationships mentioned in this chapter (and the interactions between contexts that take place within them) is the level on which they take place. Some interactions within relationships take place on the *micro* level, dealing with the practices of individuals, such as their gameplay and spending habits. Other interactions concern *meso* level practices, such as the company or cooperative regulation of the game. Finally, there are also *macro* level practices noted in some relationships, which include certain processes that are propagated by a collection of actors within (and sometimes outside of) the culture as a whole, such as the game or company's image in public discourse. The following contextual relationships do not always specify on which level the interactions take place, since this work attempts to follow the circuit of culture (du Gay et al. 1997) and the circuit lacks an indication of these levels. However, given the above example, the reader can distinguish at which level the practices are taking place. Should interactions or relationships concern individuals' practices (whether these individuals are players or game professionals), they are occurring at the *micro* level; if they concern groups and organizations, then they are occurring at the *meso* level; if they are concerned with the larger processes of the industry and the culture as a whole, then they are taking place at the *macro* level (Elmezeny and Wimmer, 2018).

Before continuing, it is important to distinguish the difference in terminology between interaction and relationship. *Interactions* indicate a connection between contexts, or their sub-practices. On the other hand, the term *relationship* signifies the entire process, which can be composed of one or more *interactions* taking place.

For a relationship to be happening, it needs to occur between more than one context. Hence, it is logical to assume that the minimum number of contexts required for such contextual relationships is two. The first types of contextual relationships feature only two contexts (see Table 11). The only difference between the first and second relationship listed in the following section is the direction of transformation. In the first relationship, the direction of transformation is only one way, meaning that transformations only occur from one context to the other in a direct, linear and limited manner. In the second

relationship, however, the transformation is bidirectional, meaning that both contexts are altering each other, sometimes in turn and sometimes simultaneously, making it more of a continuous cycle.

Next, relationships take place between three contexts: first with only single directional transformations, and then with multidirectional transformations, where relationships can occur between multiple contexts and in multiple directions, both back and forth. At four and five contexts, only multidirectional relationships were observed. It is assumed that in this number of contexts, interactions between contextual practices become too complicated for simple processes, and therefore, relationships might have single directional transformations but this will not be their primary feature.

Table 11: Types of contextual interactions, or the continuum of relationships.

No. of Contexts	Direction of Transformation	Example
Two	Single	Figure 7. (see Subchapter 5.8.1.1.)
Two	Bidirectional	Figure 10. (see Subchapter 5.8.1.2.)
Three	Single	Figure 12. (see Subchapter 5.8.2.1.)
Three	Multidirectional	Figure 13. (see Subchapter 5.8.2.2.)
Four	Multidirectional	Figure 14. (see Subchapter 5.8.3.)
Five	Multidirectional	Figure 16. (see Subchapter 5.8.4.)

It is also essential to note that contextual relationships take place between specific practices or phenomena within these contexts, not the overall contexts themselves. Therefore, displays of these relationships can also have the same overall form, but a different manifestation. This means a relationship conveying a transformation between the appropriation context and the identification context can have multiple examples, not just one, due to various minor practices in each context. For example, in one manifestation, a relationship can be between gamer identity negotiations (identification context) and spending habits (appropriation context), while in another manifestation it could be between the phenomena of social relationships (appropriation) and players' identification with the community (identification). Additionally, these transformations can occur between multiple practices in each linked context, and are not bound to a single phenomenon.

Contextual relationships are not so much distinct typologies as much as they are a continuum of transformations between a varied number of contexts. The spectrum, which begins with a transformation between two contexts, is also the initial step for all other relationships that take place between three or more contexts. Because relationships all have to undergo the first stage, but not necessarily the last, there is this notion of the

continuum of contextual relationships. The number of relationships taking place on this spectrum could possibly be uncountable. However, those mentioned and detailed in the following section were witnessed directly during the 18-months. Moreover, they are the contextual transformations that were observed to be directly linked to the F2P business model and aggressive monetization.

5.8.1. Two-Context Relationships

5.8.1.1.   *Single Directional Transformations*

As mentioned before, almost all contextual relationships on this continuum begin with this stage: a single directional transformation between two contexts. This sort of relationship takes place between two contexts only, and while it occurs as a first step in other relationships, in its original form it is a single-step process that signals a transformation coming from practices within one context onto others in a different context. Although the first stage in any possible contextual relationship could serve as an example for relationships at this stage, there are a couple of specific examples that are prominent in their ability to display the transformations the F2P model produces to the Empire game culture, and possibly other games as well. The relationships noted here appear to be theoretical mappings, however they are the result of an empirical analysis of the cumulative observations and interviews conducted during the 18-month ethnography. For a detailed look at the empirical analysis process of these relationships, please refer Subchapter 4.8.
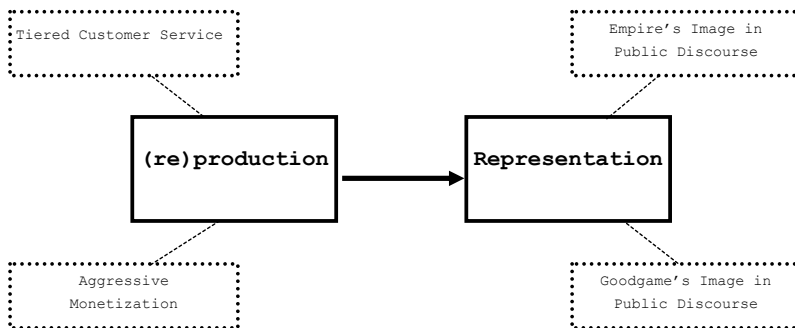
Figure 7: Two-context, single directional relationship between (re)production and representation.

Transforming the Game or Company's Image

There are two distinct relationships that result in transforming the context of representation, or more specifically: Goodgame Studios' and Empire's image in media and public discourse.

The first example (see Figure 7) is the context of (re)production's transformation to the context of representation. In this contextual relationship, practices falling within the context of (re)production have a negative transformation to both the game and the company's image in media and public discourse. This relationship can be explained through the theory of public esteem (Carroll, 2011)[13]. Practices such as aggressive monetization, apparent in game development and exacerbated through obvious dark design patterns (temporal, monetary, etc.), as well as differences in treatment by customer service agents begin to be noticed by players of the game. These aspects are then discussed on various forums, both official and non-official, altering the established image of Empire in public discourse. These interactions between practices transforms the image of Empire from a balanced and fair F2P game to a more aggressive pay-to-win one, hurting the emotional appeal of the company (Passow et al., 2005). Sometimes, the way the company runs its own business has also resulted in negative media attention, such as the previously mentioned case concerning employee redundancies. On this occasion, it was a phenomenon that dealt with those who produce game content, not an act of production itself, that led to the transformation in representation. This in turn resulted in an outcry in both local (German) and specialty (gaming) media, changing GGS' image for the worse.
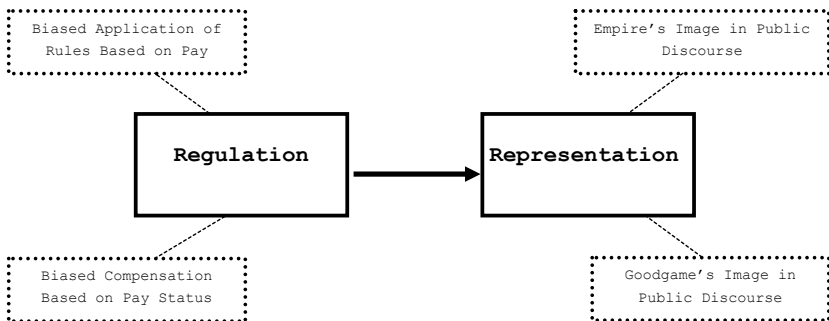
Figure 8: Two-context, single directional relationship between regulation and representation.

Another similar example is how Goodgame's official regulation of Empire (regulation context) transforms both the game and the company's image in media and public discourse (see Figure 8). As discussed earlier, customer service representatives at GGS utilize an official set of rules to regulate illegal in-game actions such as harassment, the use of multiple accounts or account sharing. However, these rules are not applied equally to all users, with a relatively lenient approach being taken towards higher paying users, where they usually get lighter or no punishment at all for the same infractions as those committed by non-paying or lower-paying users. The customer service agents

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[13] For more details on the theory of public esteem, please refer to Subchapter 2.4.5.1.

interviewed mentioned that while users are not directly aware of company policies that indicate greater leniency and more helpfulness for higher paying users, they do however notice active members who were not banned after being reported for heinous actions (Lara, May, 2016). Additionally, higher paying users are more likely to be compensated for their missing virtual goods when writing a ticket, even if they have intentionally deleted them. Due to customer service representatives providing better service and compensation to higher paying users, these sorts of practices led to discussions by players both in-game, on official forums and in other online spaces. This interaction between practices from different contexts have a relationship that impacts the company's emotional appeal (Passow et al., 2005) and the degree to which it is regarded by the public (Carroll, 2011), as well as transforming the game and the company's image.

Hence, biased regulation, aggressive monetization, tiered customer service and content that is focused on heavier paying users (see Figures 7 and 8, above) are all practices in the two separate contexts of (re)production and regulation, manifesting in two separate relationships, which managed to transform the context of (re)production. These transformations can be observed more precisely in the way that Empire and Goodgame Studios are portrayed in media and public discourse, especially given the way that Empire is now labeled as pay-to-win.

Transforming How Players Spend In-Game

In a similar way to how certain practices in the context of (re)production can transform Empire and the company's image, they can also transform how users play and spend money in the game itself, otherwise known as practices under the context of appropriation (see Figure 9). Some of the same company practices under the context of (re)production, namely aggressive monetization through temporal dark patterns, tiered offers and customer service based on the user's payment status, as well as an antisocial environment stimulated by psychological trickery, can all transform how users appropriate the game. This contextual relationship indicates how practices within the context of (re)production interact with various methods of user appropriation of the game, ranging from how they play it competitively to how they make a habit of it. However, what was directly observed from the codes within the research material relates only to how the aforementioned practices within the (re)production context (*Aggressive Monetization, Tiered Customer Service*, etc.) transform player spending habits, and some social rules concerning the rituals of play.
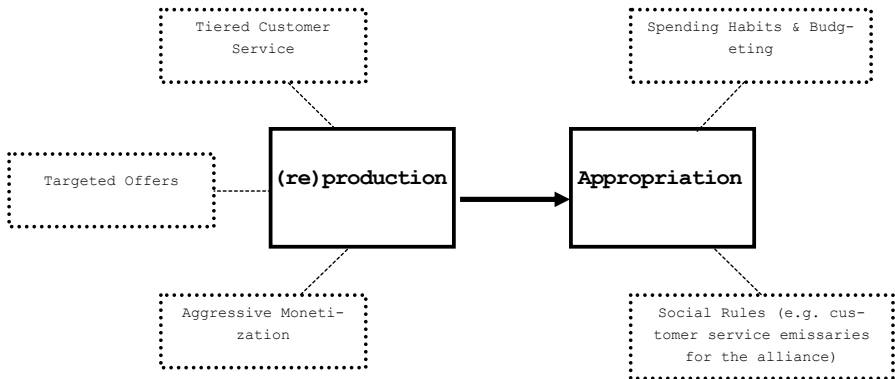
Figure 9: Two-context, single directional relationship between (re)production and appropriation.

This example from the Empire community looks at the following: when it became common knowledge in the community that higher spending users would receive better service and compensation from customer service agents, it became a sort of unspoken social rule that the highest paying users in alliances (usually guild leaders) would act as envoys to customer service representatives. These envoys would check on the status of all their members' tickets (Lara, May, 2016). Moreover, a constantly aggressive in-game environment and the continuous use of psychological trickery to instigate warfare led players to change their spending behavior from indiscriminate spending to monthly budgeting of real-life currency, in addition to the planned budgeting of in-game currency for emergencies (6eyes & Eek, January, 2017). Targeted offers also taught users to save their money for certain prime time periods unique to them, and not waste their money on regular average sales available to everyone.

While these company practices in the (re)production context have driven transformations in the appropriation context, transformations in spending habits and social rules do not alter the (re)production context, making this contextual relationship a single directional one. This is different to the relationships in the following section, where the two contexts can, and in fact do, transform one another.

5.8.1.2.   Bidirectional Transformations

Contextual relationships with two bidirectional contexts form the next step in the continuum. This is the natural progression for most contextual relationships on the spectrum, other than those that evolve into linear relationships[14]. Contextual relationships of this kind indicate that the transformations occurring between contexts are reciprocated, meaning that while one context might instigate transformations in the other, certain

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[14] See single-directional, three context relationship below, Subchapter 5.8.2.1.

transformations also appear in the original context as well. It is important to note that mutual bidirectional transformations between contexts can occur either as a result of one another, in a way that is similar to a consequent process, or they can be occurring simultaneously. The following examples showcase the trade of transformations between two contexts, occurring either concurrently or asynchronously. In a similar way to other bidirectional and multidirectional relationships featuring more contexts, the following examples emphasize how, in the circuit of culture, contexts and their underlying practices are strongly interconnected.

Transformations Between Player Appropriation and Their Identification

The relationship between the appropriation and identification contexts is quite close, which can not only be observed in the following two examples of contextual relationships, but also in others mentioned later on, as well as in previous studies looking at identification processes in games (Ducheneaut et al. 2006; Van Looy et al. 2010). The following two examples deal specifically with Empire players' financial or time investments (appropriation) and how these led to transformations to their gamer identity (identification). These transformations to gamer identity then alter a player's financial and time investments in the game again, resulting in a bidirectional relationship between the two contexts.
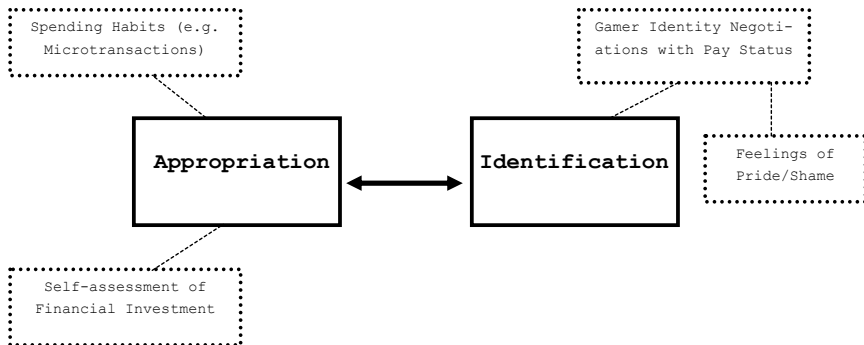

Figure 10: Two-context, bidirectional relationship between spending habits and gamer identity.

The first bidirectional relationship featuring two contexts deals with how user microtransactions alter players' feelings regarding their own game experiences (see Figure 10). This is mostly related to how they socially identify as a gamer (non-gamer, casual, hardcore). For example, as mentioned earlier, classically defined hardcore gamers take pride in beating others without having to spend any money in Empire (see Subchapter 5.3.1.2.). Hence, the practice of spending in the game (appropriation) can alter how certain players feel about their experience and personal identity, making them proud if they win without microtransactions, or ashamed if they have to spend to beat

others. This aspect is usually negotiated through the individual's gamer identity, meaning that hardcore gamers (or those who are part of other gaming communities that see real problems with microtransactions) are the ones who are more likely to experience this pride or shame.

Depending on the feelings experienced by players, and negotiated through their gamer identity (identification), reverse transformations in spending habits and an assessment of financial investments (appropriation) can occur. This means that hardcore players who feel too much shame due to their microtransactions will reassess their spending practices and readjust their financial investments accordingly. Alternatively, for casual players who feel joy after beating others through financial investment in the game, a transformation in their overall spending practices will probably occur, as well as a reevaluation of their financial investments, turning them from lower or non-spending users to moderate ones. These identity negotiation processes and spending habits can be explained through De Grove et al.'s (2015) combined theory of social identity and self-categorization of gamer identity, where individuals put themselves into certain groups and are expected to behave in a specific way[15]. Having followed the correct behaviors associated with their self-assigned group will incite feelings of pride or shame. These feelings should then signal a transformation for the individual to correct their spending practices to be correctly aligned with their desired group characteristics once again.

The second relationship example in this section deals again with the same two contexts of appropriation and identification, however this time with different sub-phenomena (see Figure 11). This relationship looks specifically at the interaction between user investments in the game, both financial and temporal (appropriation), and the value players give to their own virtual goods or properties (identification). This interaction occurs in the opposite direction as well, or in the way in which the value users attach to virtual features affects the time and money they invest in Empire.

This contextual relationship was made most apparent during interviews with players and employees, where information was obtained about how much time and money they had invested in the game. Those players who had spent quite a lot of both time and money seemed to attach a significant amount of worth to their accounts and castles. Even though players acknowledged that they did not actually own their accounts or virtual properties, stating that they actually belonged to Goodgame, they still said that they would feel frustrated over the loss of their accounts. By contrast, employees who did not invest any of their own money into the game and could rebuild their own account with hacks should anything happen to it, were not as attached to their virtual properties.

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[15] For more details on De Grove's theory, please refer to Subchapter 2.4.4.1.

Players who felt attached to their virtual goods and properties also tended to invest more financially and temporally into the game itself, while those who did not feel a sense of attachment failed to do so. Dedicated Empire players interviewed would log on almost hourly to make sure everything was in working order, and that no harm had come to their properties. On the other hand, employees who did not care for the game (except for Gul'dan, because he was a dedicated player) could go the entire weekend without checking their accounts, and only went online if they had to check things during working hours.

The interaction and transformation indicated in this contextual relationship might not be revolutionary. After all, it is only logical for individuals to have increased attachment to things that they have invested significant time and money in. Still, what is slightly interesting is that the virtual items' symbolic value is not only determined by their ability to establish social status and express identity (Lehdonvirta, 2009). The value users derive from their virtual properties is entirely unique, and can rarely be equated to real world currencies due to the fluctuating in-game economy. This relationship highlights the fact that, unlike with other games (Gruning, 2013), in Empire, an item's value is also based on a player's investment. Therefore, in addition to its social functions, a virtual item's value should also be associated with the entirety of an individual's temporal and financial investments in the game. So, the transformations from this contextual relationship are an indication that time and money are interchangeable resources in F2P.

Both bidirectional relationships featuring two contexts mentioned above acknowledge the mutual and simultaneous (or successive) transformations occurring between Empire users' spending practices and their identification processes. These relationships and transformations essentially stress the important link between the contexts of appropriation and identification in the circuit of F2P game culture.
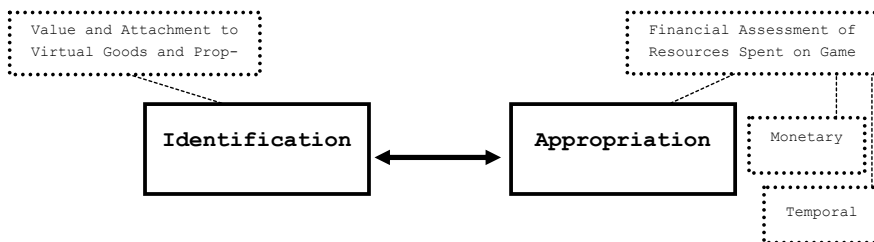

Figure 11: Two-context, bidirectional relationship between virtual aspect value and player investments.

5.8.2. Three-Context Relationships

5.8.2.1.   *Single Directional*

Relationships happening between three contexts is the next progressive step in the continuum of contextual relationships, starting with single-directional linear relationships, and then moving on to multidirectional ones. In the case of relationships between three contexts, with transformations taking place in one direction, it was observed that these transformations occur in a linear process, or sometimes even a cycle, with the last context transforming the first one again and beginning a new phase. The best possible example of this is the relationship between the contexts of (re)production, identification and representation. More specifically this contextual relationship deals with aggressive monetization practices, employee and player identities, and Empire's or Goodgame's image in public discourse.

The transformations occurring between the three aforementioned contexts, and the interactions between their sub-practices, happen in a linear process. However, this can also be considered a cycle, with the last context influencing the first and signaling a new round of transformations (see Figure 12). It begins with aggressive monetization (the context of [re]production) and other questionable development practices that transform the context of identification. These development practices bring transformations to the feelings of both the employees and players, which are negotiated by their identities. In the case of the employees, the feelings they have towards the company's sometimes questionable practices are negotiated through their personal gamer identities, meaning that those who identify as gamers, who are part of the mainstream game culture and therefore possibly meritocratic[16] (Paul, 2018), are more likely to have problems with the company's commercialized P2W development approach (Arcanine, May, 2016). On the other hand, casual players, and those who do not identify as gamers at all, see the company as a business, and do not have any problem with over commercialized gameplay or business practices (Lara & Zelda, May, 2016).

In the case of Empire players, Goodgame's aggressive development practices are usually negotiated through the player's own personal payment status, which is also a feature of their identity. This means that for the higher paying individuals, aggressive monetization and other questionable development practices are not seen negatively, while non-paying or lower-paying users tend to be more critical of GGS' actions and values. This can again be explained through De Grove et al.'s (2015) concept of social identity and self-categorization, where gamers fitting in a certain group (whether hardcore/casual divide or pay status divide) might express certain opinions or behaviors that

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[16] For more details on meritocracy in game culture, see F2P depictions in public discourse, Subchapter 2.4.5.1.

are prototypical of this group. Behaving in a certain way helps players maintain a particular amount of social capital[17] by preserving specific group opinions (Crawford and Rutter, 2006).
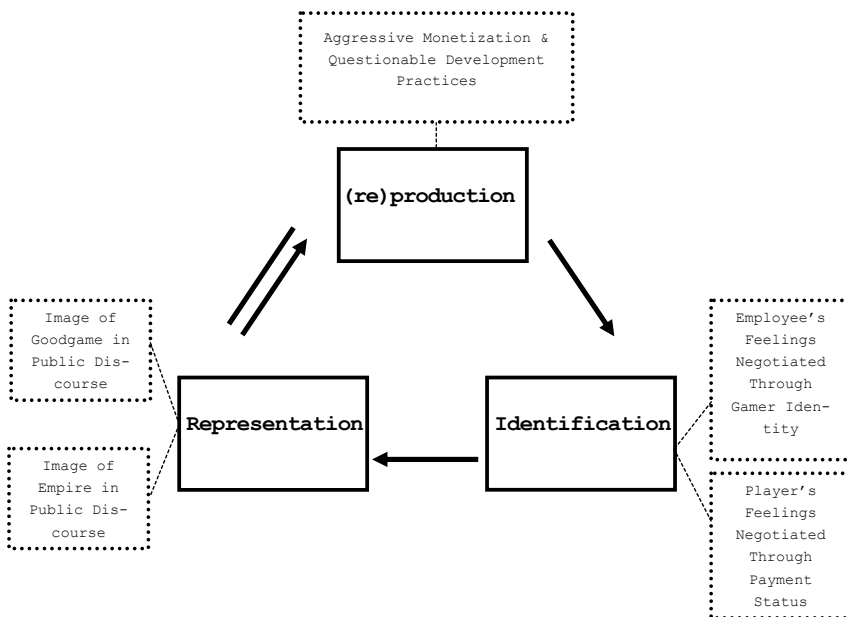

Figure 12: Three-context, single directional relationship between questionable production issues, player and employee identities and representation of the game and company.

In the case of Empire players, Goodgame's aggressive development practices are usually negotiated through the player's own personal payment status, which is also a feature of their identity. This means that for the higher paying individuals, aggressive monetization and other questionable development practices are not seen negatively, while non-paying or lower-paying users tend to be more critical of GGS' actions and values. This can again be explained through De Grove et al.'s (2015) concept of social identity and self-categorization, where gamers fitting in a certain group (whether hardcore/casual divide or pay status divide) might express certain opinions or behaviors that are prototypical of this group. Behaving in a certain way helps players maintain a particular amount of social capital by preserving specific group opinions (Crawford and Rutter, 2006).

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[17] More details on social capital theory can be found in Subchapter 2.4.3.2.

The feelings expressed by both employees and players, and negotiated by their pay-ment status or gamer identities, then transform the representation context. Depending on how individuals feel about both the game and GGS' actions, they are likely to either relay positive or negative opinions to the community and other public spheres, altering the game and the company's image in public discourse. While this indicates the end of the linear process, it can also restart the process once more, making it a cycle, as was the case with Empire. For example, having realized the negative image of the game and the company in public discourse, GGS attempted to implement certain changes in Em-pire, increasing the company's emotional appeal (Passow et al., 2005), in the hope of improving both the game and the company's image. This included changes such as de-creased dark patterns in game design and aggressive monetization. These changes in the (re)production context would force transformations to occur in the other two contexts once more. However, the outcome of their implemented game development could not be observed, since it was applied after the ethnography was complete.

5.8.2.2.   Multidirectional

Compared to relationships with two contexts, those of three or more contexts that are not single directional are not bi but multidirectional instead. This is because interactions between practices can occur in several courses, not only back and forth. A great exam-ple of this sort of relationship is between the contexts of (re)production, identification and appropriation (see Figure 13). In this relationship, the transformations occurring are an evolution from the tightly interlinked relationship between appropriation and identifi-cation mentioned earlier, having the third context of (re)production involved to further adjust the relationship. Unlike the two-context relationships mentioned earlier, the fol-lowing example also features interactions between different sub-practices from the con-texts of appropriation and identification.

The multidirectional relationship featuring three contexts begins with a bidirectional transformation occurring between the contexts of identification and appropriation, or more specifically their sub-practices of group (alliance) identification and play as social interaction. Group identification in this context deals with how individuals identify with others within their own alliance and not those with the same payment status. Identifying with one's alliance can transform the context of appropriation, or one's social motivation for gameplay. The more one identifies with their alliance, the more likely they are to con-tinue treating the game as a social experience. This is explained through van Looy et al.'s (2010) player identification scale, where higher group identification predicted social-ization and relationships[18]. In this research, this observation was emphasized during interviews, when players who identified more with their alliance named socialization as

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[18] For more details on the player identification scale, please refer to Subchapter 2.4.4.

a motivation for play. They also added that their in-game connections were the main reason they continued to play Empire, even though they had considered quitting previously.

On the other hand, Goodgame employees, who were also part of their own alliance and should ideally have their own sense of group identification, did not show any sort of motivation for social play, treating the game as a chore instead. In the case of employees, the intention for socialization was never there and since gameplay was more akin to work, group identification was never fostered. Therefore, it is assumed that the practice of social play in itself can interact with the process of group identification, creating a relationship between these two contexts and a bidirectional transformation.
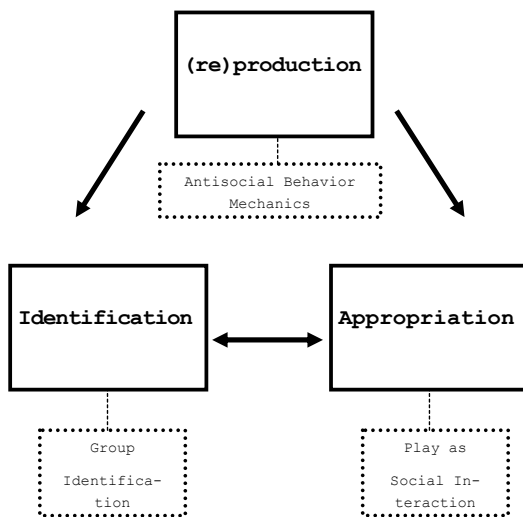
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                    ┌─────────────────┐
                    │  (re)production │
                    └─────────────────┘
            ↙         ┌ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ┐        ↘
                      : Antisocial Behavior :
                      :     Mechanics     :
                      └ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ┘
   ┌─────────────────┐                   ┌─────────────────┐
   │  Identification │ ◄──────────────► │  Appropriation  │
   └─────────────────┘                   └─────────────────┘
    ┌ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ┐                     ┌ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ┐
    :    Group    :                     :   Play as    :
    : Identifica- :                     : Social In-  :
    :    tion     :                     :  teraction   :
    └ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ┘                     └ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ┘
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Figure 13: A three-context, multidirectional relationship between group identification, social play and antisocial behavior mechanics.

The bidirectional relationship between identification and appropriation is further transformed by the third context of (re)production and its sub-practices: antisocial behavior mechanics. Antisocial behavior mechanics are mental tricks implemented by GGS to incentivize spending in the game, such as the artificial scarcity of virtual items and property, or perpetual attacks by NPCs, resulting in an unsociable in-game environment. Antisocial behavior mechanics can interact with both group identification and social play, transforming both the contexts of identification and appropriation. When too many of these mechanics are present, social play becomes much less common and even the most communally minded players tend to focus more on self-preservation. The same applies for group identification: when excessive antisocial behavior mechanics come into effect, players can become tightknit with their existing alliances, hoping to

nurture their relationships because of the fear of facing the unsociable environment alone.

The transformations (re)production has on the other two contexts are single directional because neither group identification nor social play can interact with or transform the antisocial mechanics. However, the impact that antisocial mechanics have on the other two contextual phenomena can transform the nature of their bidirectional relationship through altering the two original practices, as mentioned above. This example showcases how multidirectional transformations can occur in contextual relationships. From this point onwards, the following contextual relationships are only considered multidirectional.

5.8.3. Four-Context Relationships

Examples of relationships with four contexts cover almost the entire circuit and are one step from the end of the continuum. The transformations communicated through these relationships are usually more complicated than those with only two or three contexts, and therefore are usually multidirectional. The first example, which best illustrates this sort of contextual relationship, builds on an aforementioned relationship, and deals with production practices, employees' feelings towards them, and the game's image in public discourse (see Figure 12). However, in the four-context version of this relationship, there is the additional context of regulation, and the practice of how employees choose to apply rules in Empire.

The four-context relationship is similar to the aforementioned one, where questionable (re)production practices can transform employee identities, which in turn alter how the employees communicate about the game and the company in public discourse. However, what is different in this relationship is that there is also a bidirectional transformation between representation and identification or employees' feelings towards the company's actions (see Figure 14). This is because it was observed that employees can feel worse about the company's business practices based on how the game and the company's image is communicated in media and public discourse. For example, when the overall consensus in public discourse was that Empire was a low-quality game, those who identified strongly as gamers were quite dissatisfied with the company's actions and plans for the game (Arcanine, May, 2016). This can again be explained through De Grove et al.'s (2015) concept of social identity and self-categorization, where gamers identify with a certain group (hardcore gamers), and the sharing of group tastes or preferences (e.g. for higher quality or not overly commercialized games) helps individuals sustain their cultural capital (Crawford and Rutter, 2006).

In this contextual relationship, the context of identification also transforms the context of regulation. More specifically, the way in which employees identify can transform the way they regulate Empire and enforce in-game rules: choosing to either treat all players fair-

ly, or provide preferential treatment. However, dealing with company practices, transformations in regulation do not have to do with an employee's gamer identity (De Grove et al., 2015). Instead, they are based on the employees' own moral codes of conduct. For example, one customer service representative interviewed stated that she answers tickets in the order that she receives them, and not based on their payment priority (Zelda, May, 2016). Another representative said that he compensates all users equally when they write in tickets asking for missing virtual assets, or asking for compensation because of bugs, regardless of their payment status (Weasley, May, 2016).
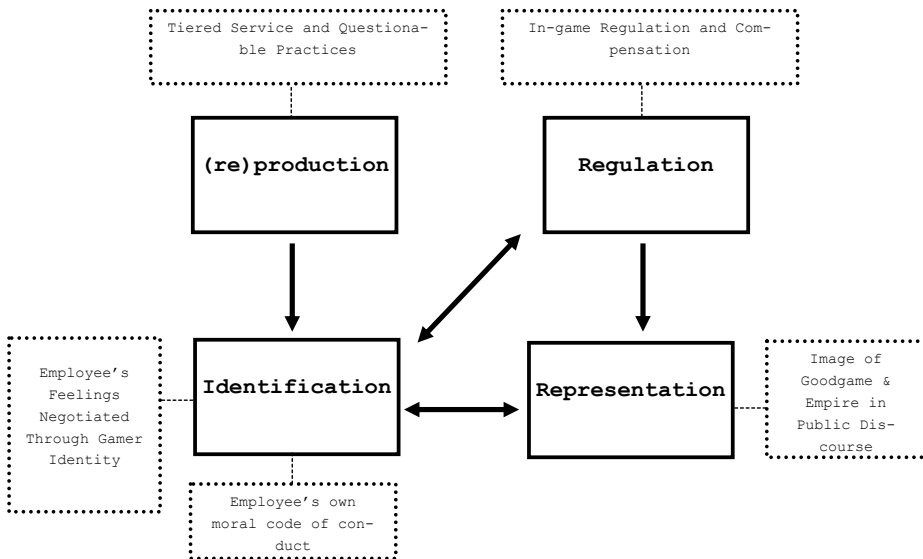
Figure 14: Four-context relationship between questionable development practices, employee identities, in-game regulation and representation in public discourse.

This contextual transformation can be considered bidirectional, with the context of regulation also altering the context of identification. On the one hand, these acts by customer service representatives are done because they believe them to be fair and correct courses of action. However, another perspective is that this sort of regulation assists employees in feeling better about working for GGS as well as about company practices they cannot control, giving them a sense of autonomy through small acts of defiance. This autonomy is a transformation in the context of identification, or the feelings employees have towards the company and its actions. Moreover, in one further step, this sort of regulation can then transform the context of representation, where players who have received fair treatment from customer service representatives are more likely to cultivate a better image of the company and the game in public discourse. This occurs because of increased likability, trust or emotional appeal (Passow et al. 2005), enhanc-

ing the existing negative image in discourse: the one which had been previously altering employee mindsets at the start.

Another example of a relationship featuring four contexts deals with three different contexts' bidirectional transformations over the context of appropriation, or alternatively the way in which appropriation has a multidirectional transformation on three different respective contexts (see Figure 15). More specifically, this contextual relationship is concerned with how the practices of tiered customer service, targeted offers ([re]production), and biased in-game regulation and compensation (regulation) can lead to a fragmented community (identification), which stimulates certain kinds of gameplay that mimic situations in the real world (appropriation). The fragmented community, resulting in a specific sort of gameplay and real-world mimicry, can be explained through Weber, Henderson and Parson's (1947) notions of social stratification, as well as Fritz's (2003) transfer model[19].
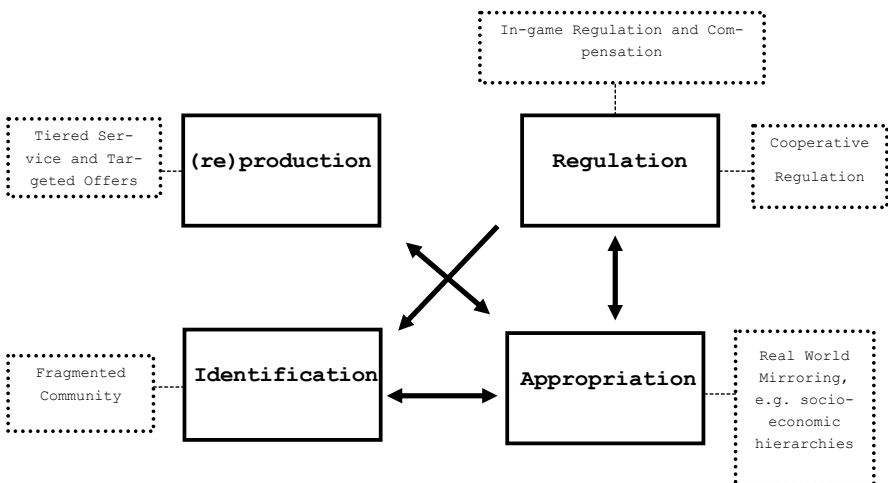
Figure 15: Four-context relationship highlighting a multidirectional transformation between appropriation and three respective contexts of identification, production and regulation.

This relationship begins with company practices from the (re)production context, where aspects such as tiered services and targeted offers provide better advantages, services and virtual items to those who are willing to pay, transforming the appropriation context by providing specific players with an improved gaming experience and competitive edge. The appropriation context can also transform the (re)production context in return, through endorsing these game developments, where people will continue to "pay-to-

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[19] See Subchapter 2.4.3.5.

win". Therefore, this sort of content will continue to be produced, since it is readily bought (Arcanine, May, 2016).

Likewise, biased regulation and compensation based on payment status can transform appropriation as well. This sort of regulation reinforces payment-status hierarchies, letting users know that GGS does have a preference. By playing favorites, GGS allows users to also treat each other differently, enabling elitism, where users can choose to group off separately and play with their own kind. These sorts of gameplay practices mirror some real-world sensibilities and class structures (Weber et al., 1947). However, the appropriation context can also transform regulation, a positive example of which is found in the fairplay rules. The cooperative form of regulation created and maintained by the community itself was made as a response to official regulation and game procedures, where players attempt to curb elitism and other antisocial behaviors.

Both (re)production and regulation's transformations to appropriation also have a similar impact to that of the context of identification. The differentiation between users in both of these contexts indicates a division in the community, where players are likely to identify with those of similar payment groups, leading to a fragmented society. This fragmented in-game community can be observed through Bourdieu's (1990) theory of habitus[20]. Separate payment-groups, similar to gamer identities (hardcore/casual), have different methods of play, opinions and identification, as reflected in RQ1. This can be considered their habitus (ibid). These differences between payment groups create an inequality between users (Bourdieu, 1984), justifying social discrimination (a fragmented community) based not only on their payment status (economic capital) but also on their tastes, opinions and preferences (cultural capital).

The identification context then in turn transforms the appropriation context, where individuals are more likely to play with those they identify with[21], or those of their own pay status, somewhat mirroring real-world stratification and class structures (Weber et al., 1947). The appropriation context can transform the identification context in reverse, because as long as players continue to play in these divided groups, the community will continue to be fragmented. Should players reach out beyond their select payment groups and choose to mingle with others, then this sort of gameplay can bridge gaps, and the community can begin to become more cohesive.

One step before the end of the continuum, relationships with four contexts are just one shy from being a complete circuit of transformations.

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[20] For more details on Bourdieu's concept of habitus, please refer to the Identification in Casual and Free-to-Play Games Subchapter 2.4.4.4.
[21] For more details on identifying with payment groups, please refer to Subchapter 5.3.2.1.

5.8.4. Five-Context Relationships

The final position on the continuum of contextual relationships is held by a relationship between all five contexts of Empire's game culture. The example given was most notable during the 18-months, where transformations between contexts could be observed through in-game actions and interview statements. The full-circuit contextual relationship is similar to the previously mentioned relationship, with multidirectional transformations between the contexts of appropriation, identification, regulation and (re)production (see Figure 15). This five-context relationship emphasizes some of the same sub-practices, with the addition of other ones under some of the contexts. Still, the focus of the contextual relationship is on tiered production and regulation, which creates a divide in the Empire gaming community. However, this relationship also highlights new transformations due to this community divide, primarily through how it alters the ways in which players identify with various aspects, how this identification then transforms game appropriation, and finally how this can transform game representations in public discourse (see Figure 16). The specifics of how the practices within these contexts interact to allow these transformations will be detailed below. However, due to this relationship encompassing all contexts, it also highlights direct transformations between contexts noted in earlier relationships, such as (re)production's or regulation's transformations on representation (see 5.8.1.1).

As noted above, this contextual relationship begins with the contexts of (re)production and regulation, or the company practices of tiered service, targeted offers, biased regulation and compensation. Due to these factors causing a divide between users, a transformation can be noted when it comes to the identification context, or more specifically how users identify with their group members (group identification), with the community itself (community identification), and with their own virtual assets (game identification). Higher-paying users tend to show more community and group identification, becoming more deeply involved in Empire's development matters (linked to appropriation) and having close contact with community managers (Arcanine, May, 2016). Additionally, they sometimes serve as emissaries for their alliances to customer representatives, showing significant group identification, while non-paying users were mostly concerned with their own problems (Lara, May, 2016). This sort of behavior can arguably be attributed to having been transformed by the existing environment promoted by tiered service, biased regulation and compensation.

Alterations in individuals' identification processes can have a bidirectional transformation on the appropriation context, or the practice of community involvement, as well as players' motivations for play. If Empire users identify strongly with their groups, community, or virtual assets, they might be more committed to the act of gameplay itself. Additionally, they might have different motivations for playing the game. For exam-

ple, if they identify strongly with their alliance, they might be more socially motivated to play the game than those who do not identify with their alliance. This can be explained through van Looy et al.'s (2010) player identification scale, which states that group identification predicts socialization and relationships. Moreover, there is a reverse relationship where the appropriation context can transform identification. For instance, those who are not involved in their community at all or have no desire for social gameplay will most likely have less group and community identification, choosing to focus on building their virtual properties instead. This was the case with one interviewed customer service representative (Zelda), who only focused on growing her castle and outposts, never taking part in group events or chats, even while being part of an alliance. This interaction between contexts can perhaps be explained through various player motivation types, such as achievement, social or immersion motivated players (Yee, 2005).

Alternatively, company practices under the contexts of (re)production and regulation can directly transform the appropriation context, not just that of identification. Both tiered customer service and biased regulation can interact with community involvement and motivations for play. Interviewed community managers stated that higher-paying users, on the receiving end of the best customer service and regulation, were more involved on the official forums than non-paying users (Arcanine, May, 2016). Additionally, some players interviewed stated that the current state of game monetization has made it almost impossible for them to be competitive. This alters certain players' current incentives for play, as they move from being top of the leaderboards to merely staying afloat (6eyes, January, 2017). Transformations in player motivation can be explained through Fritz's (2003) transfer model, where failing to achieve control in a game can lead to abandonment of the game (Fritz, 2006), or in this case, repurposing.

Naturally, these company practices under the contexts of (re)production and regulation can also transform the context of representation, as mentioned in earlier contextual relationships. More specifically, the practices of tiered customer services and biased regulation can interact with the process of how Empire and GGS are perceived in the mainstream media and public discourse. While these transformations have been noted before in other contextual relationships, they are also an important part of the entire circuit, especially as they have an interaction with the context of appropriation.

One final interaction in this contextual relationship is appropriation's role in transforming the representation context. Individual commitment and involvement in the community can interact with Empire and Goodgame's image in public discourse. For example, those who are more committed to the game and community tend to think highly of GGS, and will defend both the game and the company publicly, even when they are critical of certain aspects privately (6eyes, January, 2017). This is possibly due to them being more receptive to an emotional appeal (Passow et al. 2005),or having more likability

and trust for GGS. Representation can also transform the appropriation context in reverse, allowing a specific image of Empire to alter individuals' motivations for play. A good example of this is that, for a number of players, a maintained image of Empire as a P2W game in public discourse will discourage them from competitive motivations and will likely change their incentives to social ones, should they continue to play the game. Hence, the publicized image of the game is important so as to not promise an unachievable form of gameplay, e.g. a fair battleground for all (Zul'dan, May, 2016). However, this is never likely to be the case. With Empire, similar to other F2P games and software, the advertised image is always an inclusive one, making the product appear accessible to anyone with a computer, without discussing the economic implications (Evans, 2015).

This full-circuit relationship emphasizes the complicated interactions and transformations that can occur between the contexts of Empire's game culture, and, it is assumed, other F2P games as well. In theory, utilizing the entire circuit of culture should result in interactions occurring between each and every context. While this is certainly possible, and there are likely other relationships of note, the one presented here is the relationship that was most prominent during the ethnography, and the one with the most relevant transformations for this research. These transformations directly dealt with the F2P business model and its various commercialization processes. However, it is important to state that there are multiple other variations of a full-circuit relationship, as well as fewer contextual ones, which might not have been noted in this study.

Nevertheless, through the relationships mentioned here, we are able to see how the contexts of Empire's (and possibly other F2P) game culture can transform each other to stimulate certain practices and phenomena. Aspects such as unique cooperative regulation, a game's image in public discourse, or even gameplay which mirrors real-world socioeconomic hierarchies, could all possibly be contributed to transformations, relationships and interactions between the various contexts of the circuit of the culture, rather than single practices under a certain context alone.
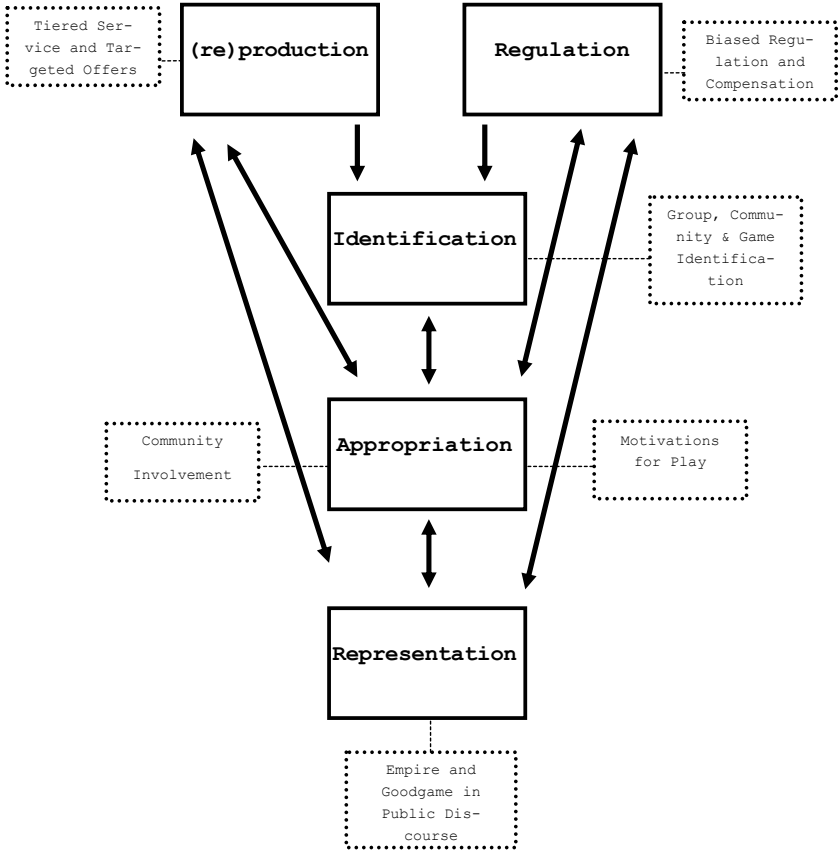
Figure 16: Contextual relationship between all five contexts of Empire's game culture.

5.9. Contextual Relationships: Lessons Learned for the Study of Media Cultures

The answers to RQ2 highlighted several interesting insights concerning Empire game culture, which can theoretically be applied to game or media cultures in general. Firstly, the answer to RQ2 exhibited the intricacies of how the contexts of Empire game culture (and presumably other game and media cultures) are interconnected, transforming each other in various ways. The particulars of the contexts' interrelation can be indicated on a spectrum, one that rates the connectedness of the relationship based on the amount of contexts and underlying practices involved. Moreover, answers to RQ2 underlined a distinction between contextual interactions, which occur between practices from different contexts, and contextual relationships, which occur as a result of these interactions. In this research, the distinct F2P characteristics of Empire, such as questionable company practices, interacted with others, resulting in unique relationships or processes, typical of F2P culture, such as socioeconomic in-game hierarchies.

What the answers to RQ2 also emphasize is that seemingly unrelated processes from completely irrelevant contexts can transform one another, stressing the interrelation of the contexts of Empire (and presumably other media/game) culture. For example, company development practices ([re]production) can transform how employees feel about the company and how they choose to enforce company regulations and policies within the game (regulation), which in turn can transform both how users play the game (appropriation) and their motivations for play (identification).

Overall, answers to this question indicated that F2P (and possibly other game/media) culture characteristics are also dependent on individual practices under separate contexts of the circuit of culture, such as tiered customer service or budgeting of in-game or real-life currency. These practices, across different cultural contexts then *interact* with each other to create contextual *relationships* which demonstrate processes or phenomena distinct to the culture itself, e.g. socioeconomic in-game hierarchies, or fragmented in-game communities, as observed from the case of Empire.

Contextual relationships and interactions are the greatest outcome from this research rivaling other research on media cultures. Compared to previous research on various media practices and cultures, the contextual relationships observed in this research stress the importance of observing the various contexts of the circuit of culture, and how the practices within each context interact with each other, to better understand certain cultural practices and occurrences. A number of previous studies on media cultures will now be briefly used as an example to better illustrate this point.

Khosravinik and Sarkhoh (2017) conduct a discourse analysis of participatory web platforms to analyze the phenomena of Arab identity and anti-Persian attitudes, and find that by "emphasizing fault lines of language and religion, Arabism discourse substantial-

ly draws on historical regional power struggles within a contemporary frame of a political standoff between a Shiite Iran and a Sunni 'Arab world'" (p. 3614). If the contexts of the circuit of culture were used as grounding framework for their study, it could be observed that their focus is only on the specific practices of the context of identity, whether religious or national. This forgoes a lot of the other complicated processes potentially arising from the contextual relationships that could possibly take place from the context of identity interacting with others, such as national identity interacting with how Arabs appropriate social web platforms, how these web platforms are used in the first place, and the regulations that are put into place to moderate and regulate them.

On the other hand, Udupa and Pohjonen (2019) attempt to look at the practice of extreme speech in online digital culture. Extreme speech here is defined by the authors as that coming from vitriolic and extremist online communities (ibid). While Udupa and Pohjonen (2019) do utilize an ethnography and attempt to tackle extreme speech in an innovative manner, constructing a methodological framework "that takes account of the meanings online users attach to vitriol as historical actors," (p. 3049), they still only choose to focus on certain practices coming from one or two contexts. What the researchers fail to do is address all the contexts of culture, and how they might interact, which could go some way to explaining how or why certain phenomena occur.

Finally, Klinger, Rösli and Jarren (2015) discuss the advantages and disadvantages of implementing participatory political online platforms in Swiss cities. In their research, they find that these platforms can defuse tension and the role of conflicts and motivations between formal political and informal online participation (ibid). While their study is well grounded both empirically and theoretically, it still only focuses on practices from specific contexts of the circuit of culture, and not the entire circuit. Klinger et al.'s (2015) study also manages to focus on a contextual relationship by attempting to look at how formalized or informalized participation opportunities transform or influence the behavior of citizens. However, what is lacking is the formalization of this relationship. This formalization between practices is what has been greatly detailed in the Empire ethnography. Each variation of a contextual relationship has been noted in detail, and hopefully these contextual relationships, and interactions between contexts, can also assist in future research on media and game cultures.

5.9.1. A Somewhat Unique (but not really) Game Culture

The above answers to RQ1 and RQ2: or *how the F2P model transforms various contexts of the circuit of culture*, and consequently *how these contexts transform each other*, have highlighted several unique characteristics of Empire game culture. Through using Alasuutari's (1996) hourglass model, a theoretical and organizational framework that utilizes a specific case to relate to greater social contexts, the Empire game culture (the case observed in this ethnography) can be placed into a broader game culture con-

text and related to other F2P and traditional games. Additionally, the transformations the payment model has on the overall culture of playing and producing games (macro game culture) can be observed. This includes examining whether F2P has an influence on other types of games being developed or not.

Through placing the Empire game culture into a larger context, or the overall macro game culture, we can begin to draw comparisons between it and other similar F2P games or ones with traditional payment models. Due to distinctive manifestations of specific practices and processes (socioeconomic in-game hierarchies, tiered service and production), it is easy to discern that Empire game culture is fundamentally different from that of traditional pay-to-play and subscription-based game cultures[22]. However, Empire game culture still shares several practices and processes with other games applying the F2P payment model. The objective of this study is not to directly compare other games to Empire. Hence, instead of comparing Empire to each different game individually, it is more beneficial to utilize the framework where we define game culture on the meso level.

Using the Elmezeny and Wimmer (2018) framework for defining game cultures, Empire's culture is defined on the meso level in addition to the micro level. On the micro level, Empire's culture can be defined as the standalone culture of the game itself, presenting unique practices and phenomena surrounding the Empire game. These practices can include aspects such as the use of specific language or terms found only within Empire, and not in other games. However, we can also define Empire's game culture on the meso level, where it is labeled as free-to-play game culture. By doing so, we group Empire with other similar games that share a related feature, which in this case is their payment model. Other meso level game culture definitions include console game culture, modders game culture, speed gamers, or live streamers. Through defining games which share the F2P payment model under the term F2P game culture, we can assume that games sharing the payment model also share some of the practices and phenomena which appear in Empire. These shared practices can appear from all possible contexts, and include either producers and/or users, involving practices and phenomena such as tiered customer service, in-game socioeconomic hierarchies, and a fragmented community identity.

While some other F2P games might share similar practices with Empire, not all of them will. This is dependent on a variety of factors, one of which is genre of the game; F2P games without PvP (player vs. player) options might not instigate animosity and rigid social hierarchies in the same way. Additionally, the extent to which Empire's practices and phenomena appear in other F2P games is assumed to be based on how aggres-

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[22] For a detailed definition of these cultures, please refer to Chapter 4.0 detailing the research questions.

sively monetized these other F2P games are. This is because in this study, aggressive monetization (or commercialization, which can be understood here as a profit-centric approach) is one of the main processes observed during the ethnography and analysis. It was an integral driving force for many practices and phenomena noted, such as in-game hierarchies, community sociality and company development practices. For instance, the way GGS chose to aggressively monetize Empire through abusing specific dark patterns of design, and providing preferential treatment to higher paying customers, results in certain practices such as the aforementioned socioeconomic in-game hierarchies, and a fragmented community. The extent to which these practices appear in other F2P games is also dependent on the profit-centric approach of the game developers, and how this then manifests in the various production and regulation practices of the company. If other developers also choose to aggressively enforce microtransactions and segregation of users, this can result in similar appropriation, identification and representation practices to those perpetrated seen in Empire culture.

Empire, as the representative of F2P game culture in this research, indicates that this meso-level game culture can be truly characterized and defined as something distinct from traditional, pay-to-play game culture, displaying unique, distinct practices and processes that are not present in games that do not employ the F2P model. Moreover, these new cultural practices are not without consequence. Initially, some of these practices can be likened to those of more commercialized, consumer cultures, which are primarily focused on shopping activities (McAllister, 2003). Compared to traditional pay-to-play game cultures, the practices of players in Empire game culture (and presumably F2P culture) are focused on shopping and consumption, and those of producers are centered on generating profit, instead of fostering a lasting community or providing quality content.

The F2P payment model, or more specifically F2P culture, could also possibly transform the overall macro game culture. One possible way of defining the overall macro culture is as a feature of media culture, "whose primary resources of meaning are manifested in digital games that are mostly mediated or provided through technical communication media such as handhelds or consoles," (Wimmer, 2012). Utilizing this definition includes all possible types of games, genres, consoles, players and developers in the gaming industry. F2P culture can then transform this overall macro game culture by changing certain practices and phenomena within it, or in its various micro or meso subcultures. This can occur on both the developer and user side. These transformations are especially likely to be observed when practices and phenomena, which previously could only be observed in F2P games and their cultures, begin to manifest in traditional pay-to-play and subscription games. These practices include hierarchies based on real-world socioeconomics, tiered customer service, and the like. The details of this development, or how F2P game characteristics and practices are beginning to appear in tra-

ditional, pay-to-play games, as well as the influence the model has on overall gaming culture, will be discussed in detail in the following chapter. While no other cultures were participated in during the ethnography, arguments concerning further F2P, pay-to-play games or the overall game culture are made possible through utilizing Alasuutari's hourglass model (1996) and supplementary literature on these topics. By doing this, we are able to extrapolate observations from the case study and apply them to other cultures, and a broader overall context, similar to quantitative research (ibid).

6.0.   Differentiating and Defining Free-to-Play Culture

6.1.   An Analysis Exercising Various Levels

This study presents an 18-month ethnographic investigation of the free-to-play game culture of Empire, utilizing three distinct levels of analysis: micro, meso and macro. These specific levels are applied within different stages of the analysis process, and each level plays a particular role concerning a step in the analytical procedure. Micro, meso and macro levels can define and limit concepts in multiple ways, based on their grounding notions (Quandt & Scheufele, 2011). These levels are utilized to define distinctive levels of game culture, according to the framework provided by Elmezeny and Wimmer (2018). They are also used to define specific practices and processes of the actors within the culture itself.

Elmezeny and Wimmer's (2018) framework is first utilized in this study to define the game culture analyzed in the ethnographic case study. The culture is defined at the micro level, where we limit the culture of interest to that of one specific game: the culture of Goodgame Studio's Empire. This includes the users of the game, its producers, various communities and communication outlets (forums, websites or chat rooms) that deal with the game. Furthermore, the micro level reflects not only how the game culture is defined, but also the empirical method itself, by using a specific case and then relating it to broader theoretical, social and cultural contexts (Alasuutari, 1996). Using this detailed case, the objective was to answer two precise questions *1) how does the free-to-play model transform the various contexts of game culture?* and *2) how do the various contexts of an F2P game culture transform each other?* To answer these questions, in-depth observation and analysis on the micro level alone is not sufficient. In accordance with Alasuutari's (1996) hourglass model, to be able to relate the case to a broader theoretical and social context, meso and macro level definitions of culture also have to be utilized.

To apply these levels of culture successfully, qualitative concepts of generalizability (Mayring, 2007) have to be used. These concepts assist in the comparison of practices across different game communities to establish their boundaries and define them, as well as generalize findings from a single case. In addition to argumentative generalizations (theoretical saturation which was utilized in data analysis) or looking for typical material (building on relevant literature and deductive coding), the main concept which assists in applying these levels of culture is the use of comparative literature analysis, a form of meta-analysis (ibid). Through comparing the observed practices in this ethnography to surveyed literature on F2P games, as well as games utilizing traditional payment models, distinctions can be made, and cultures can be

categorized based on their payment model, given similarities and differences in their cultural practices.

Now, the meso level is used to help define what constitutes free-to-play (F2P) game culture. By defining game culture on the meso level, findings from the micro case study can be related to other games that share the same unifying feature, in an attempt to explore their similarities, and contrast them to traditional, pay-to-play culture. Therefore, a meso-level definition of game culture is applied in this study, where F2P game culture is defined as *the culture of digital games from various genres, on diverse platforms, which utilize the freemium payment model*. By doing this, one is able to relate the findings of Empire's ethnography to a broader cultural context, utilizing scientific literature on other F2P games and comparing practices and phenomena from Empire with those observed in other F2P games. In that way, similarities between Empire and other games can be identified, helping to illustrate an overall image of F2P culture as something distinct from traditional, pay-to-play game culture (as will be explained later in this chapter).

Alternatively, another meso-level definition of game culture is utilized in this chapter: traditional (pay-to-play) game culture, which is defined as *the culture of digital games from various genres, on diverse platforms, having a set price and without microtransactions* (not utilizing the freemium model). Subscription game culture is likewise similar but *with a subscription-based payment system* (common MMORPGs like World of Warcraft being the best example).

Finally, the macro-definition of game culture, defined as the *overall culture of games, their industries, players, and methods of play all over the world*, is utilized. This is done to place the findings concerning the previously defined meso-level F2P culture in a larger context, observing the transformations this meso-level game culture has on the overall macro game culture. By defining the macro culture, the larger context is firmly outlined, and the meso-level culture (F2P) is pinpointed as a sub-culture of said context (overall macro game culture). The benefit of having a macro-level definition of game culture, and placing the findings in a larger context, is the ability to observe the implications of these findings on greater metaprocesses such as commercialization, or the increasing importance of economic (financial) aspects on organizations, culture and society as a whole (Krotz, 2007).

6.2. Characterizing Free-to-Play Culture

Characterizing free-to-play culture on the meso-level (Elmezeny & Wimmer, 2018), while not a specific goal of this research, was one of its sub-objectives. To do this, empirical observations were made during the ethnography of the micro-level culture of Empire, which were related to literature on other F2P games' practices. The resulting assumption is that F2P culture, which can be defined as that *of games from any genre, played on various platforms but sharing the unifying feature of the freemium payment model*, is marked by a number of transformations from traditional, pay-to-play and subscription game cultures, as a result of using said freemium payment model. These traditional cultures are also defined similarly, as the culture of games from multiple genres, played on various platforms but sharing the same payment models. Both definitions of traditional pay-to-play and subscription game culture include games with content that is purchasable after the initial procurement, since these are changes which are inspired by the commercialization of the F2P payment model (see Subchapter 6.5.). Nevertheless, the transformations which characterize F2P culture as distinct from these cultures are several but include[23]: unlikeness from third places (Steinkühler & Williams, 2006), a waning magic circle (Huizinga, 1955), monetized meritocracy (Paul, 2018), increased consumerism and consumer culture (McAllister, 2003), and a lack of industry regulation (Woodford, 2013).

Based on Oldenburg's (1999) typology, Steinkühler & Williams (2006) use the notion of third places to describe MMOs, because of certain characteristics such as having neutral ground, a playful mood, regular players and being seen as a home away from home (see Subchapter 2.4.3.2. for more details). These characteristics can be applied to a plethora of other pay-to-play and subscription games, not MMOs alone. However, as will be identified below, certain practices in Empire demonstrate that the game does not function as a third place.

The magic circle, on the other hand, denotes an enclosed space of play, separate from real life (Huizinga, 1955). However, games do not exist in a vacuum and are instead put into certain contexts (King & Krzywinska, 2006). Hence, the magic circle can be contextualized, and is not totally separate from the real world (Consalvo, 2009). This solidifies Juul's (2005) definition of games as half-real, containing fictional elements that are influenced by real life contexts. However, in the case of F2P games (and culture), they are more than half-real, as certain Empire practices have shown. These practices mirror real-life contexts almost exactly, breaking the boundaries that separate real life from the game world, and possibly making these games all

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[23] The following citations refer to the theoretical concepts and not findings concerning the transformations in F2P games.

too real. In that sense, F2P games should be instead defined as three quarters-real, not half-real.

Meritocracy, or the system in which achievements instead of ascribed characteristics determine the value of individuals, exists in all games, and Paul (2018) argues that it is disadvantageous to the overall game culture. It is toxic and blind to structural disadvantages such as race and gender (ibid). Nevertheless, within the context of F2P, there is the added drawback of *monetized meritocracy*, enhancing the dichotomy between pay-to-win and real skill achievements, which is heavily debated within F2P game communities. This furthers both meritocratic sentiments in F2P (and overall) game culture, as well as structural disadvantages. Certain practices observed during the ethnography indicate that Empire's game culture, similar to many other F2P games, is built around monetized meritocracy, or paying to win (or even paying for the skills to win), rather than actual skill-based achievement.

To say that regular non-F2P game cultures are not consumer cultures would not be entirely true. Games and their cultures, as a form of entertainment media, all have certain elements of consumerism. However, compared to traditional pay-to-play and subscription-based cultures, F2P culture tends to be more consumption-oriented, and akin to consumer culture, based on "shopping activities and the geography of retail space," (McAllister, 2003, p. 43). This is not only because F2P games contain certain gameplay mechanics that deal primarily with the activities and spaces of shopping and consumption (microtransactions, decorative items, skins, etc.), but also because of the lack of counterculture and participatory practices, such as modding, hacking or the creation of user-generated content (Simons & Newman, 2003) present in most traditional game cultures. In addition to consumer mechanics, user practices observed in Empire, and possibly other F2P games, emphasize the increasing importance of consumption in how they play and appropriate the game itself.

One final transformation of F2P culture that marks it as different from traditional game culture(s) is the lack of industry regulation. Traditional box games receive sufficient regulation concerning content, age ratings and the like, which F2P games (mobile or browser) rarely receive. However, more importantly, as Empire's ethnography has shown, activities within the game itself are not regulated by third parties, and questionably controlled by the company itself. There are future efforts to ensure consumer protection like those proposed by the European Commissions ("Commission and Member States to raise consumer concerns with app industry" 2014), and while there have been certain improvements, greater results are still to be seen. Moreover, there are also industry efforts intended to trick consumers in order to increase spending.

These particular transformations can be identified by looking at the practices and processes within four specific areas of any F2P game and its culture. They are: company practices, community practices, individual practices and industry practices. Unlike the way that previous findings are organized in the five contexts of the circuit of culture, these four categories group practices based on actors, focusing only on the overall F2P culture transformation, not that of certain contexts. The following sections will discuss in detail the four specific spheres in which one is able to observe these particular transformations, which distinguish F2P culture as something different from traditional, pay-to-play game culture.

6.3.   Company and Community Practices

Observing certain company practices can help in understanding how F2P culture is different from traditional pay-to-play culture, especially concerning the weakening magic circle. Dealing with Empire game culture, the ethnography highlighted evident findings that identify this main difference from traditional games, which signals the blurring of the real and game worlds, almost breaking the magic circle (Huizinga, 1955); or more precisely, further contextualizing it in real life (Consalvo, 2009).

Among the observed company practices emphasizing this transformation, the most prominent is the implementation of excessive and annoying advertisements in the game world by the developer. Empire contains a plethora of in-game advertisements that clutter the user interface and notify players of various sales, or repeatedly prompt them to make purchases. In addition to bringing the practice of advertisement and promotion into the game world, which is done in an obvious manner that does not fit the fictional narrative, these advertisements almost constantly include a real world monetary value in which the items in question should be purchased (not in-game currency). This is done in order to incentivize spending, further blurring the line between the real and game worlds.

Furthermore, GGS implements certain mechanisms in Empire, similar to other F2P games, known as social capital dark. These patterns attempt to commodify social interaction, helping to promote the game through linked social media accounts (Nieborg, 2015). By allowing players to link their real-life identities to their in-game accounts through Facebook and other platforms, the magic circle is weakened again through introducing further real-world contexts. No longer are game world and real-world identities entirely separate, as in traditional MMORPGs or box-games. While some other non-F2P games might feature the option of linking social media accounts to share achievements, this mechanism is only made worse in Empire (and other aggressively monetized F2P games), due to incentivizing users to link their accounts and share content through them. Players are offered in-game currency and other virtual items should they decide to link their social media accounts and share their achievements on associated platforms, making sure that for those who want to get the most out of the game, the separation between their real-world identities and the game is no longer an option.

These two company practices indicate Goodgame Studios' commercialized approach to Empire: one that is entirely profit-centric. As previously shown in RQ1, GGS often sacrifices game quality and customer service in order to generate more profit from those players spending a greater amount of money in their game. This is accomplished through mental trickery, as well as unfair compensation and tiered customer services across payment classes, incentivizing microtransactions. By treating those

who spend more differently to those who spend less, GGS is only following simple business strategy. However, this practice still introduces further real-world contexts into the game world, again weakening the magic circle. For a lot of players, gameplay is a getaway from their real-world problems and responsibilities. Having socioeconomic status translated into the game-world, where they might receive equally negative treatment, denies them the option of full escapism.

Not only do these company practices lead to a waning magic circle (Huizinga, 1955), but so do some community practices that also manage to introduce numerous real-world contexts, more so than traditional, pay-to-play game culture. The company practices (and game mechanics) that introduce real-world socioeconomics also lead to in-game hierarchies among the players in the community itself that mimic the real world. Due to microtransactions in Empire (and several other F2P games), players are divided into several payment groups, and as previously pointed out (see Subchapter 5.4), higher paying users have elite status in the community, earning more respect from their fellow community members. While this respect is due to their achievements, most of these achievements are usually a result of their payment, since Empire has been developed to be a pay-to-win game. Additionally, practices in the community such as selective recruitment in alliances and selective play within the same payment groups (see Subchapter 5.3.2.1) also emphasize the transfer of socioeconomic realities from the real world into the game world.

Given the option of microtransactions in Empire, and the allure of the status and respect dispensed to those with achievements, regardless of whether these were attained through payment or actual skill, *monetized meritocracy* is another community practice that marks Empire (and F2P culture) as being something transformed from traditional, pay-to-play game culture. The notion of monetized meritocracy is oxymoronic; meritocratic systems reward individuals based on their skill (Paul, 2018), so how can they be based on wealth or payment? This term is one that is being coined in this research and hopefully will catch on in future game studies. In Empire, and in several other P2W free-to-play games, monetized meritocracy means that players are able to buy their way to the top. Paying to win indicates that gamers might not necessarily have the skill to beat their opponents, however they are able to purchase the necessary skills to do so (whether these consist of in-game currency or items), and in the end, the game will reward them for their achievements (read: purchases). Within Empire, players can purchase premium troops, tools or currency, all of which are much stronger than regularly accessed items, and are arguably necessary for competitive play. Having the ability to purchase skill negates the neutral ground of the in-game world, and reintroduces real world contexts once again, diminishing the magic circle (Huizinga, 1955).

Due to socioeconomic hierarchies, a monetized meritocracy, and mental trickery implemented through company practices, the resulting in-game environment in Empire is somewhat hostile. While this is not significantly different to other competitive game cultures, whether F2P or traditional, what is noteworthy is that the hostility observed in Empire is made worse through these aforementioned practices, which do not exist in traditional, non-F2P game culture(s). In Empire, the community is fragmented along payment lines, and GGS does not seem to want to bridge this gap or foster a friendlier community, because doing so would mean less in-game aggression, which would also lead to fewer in-game microtransactions. While this does not affect the magic circle, a severely aggressive in-game environment is uncharacteristic of a game as a third place (Steinkühler & Williams, 2006).

For games and virtual worlds to function as third places they have to incorporate certain characteristics. The community practices of Empire stated above, and possibly other F2P games (using the meso-level culture definition), reveal it to be anything but a third place. For instance, third places are seen as having a leveling characteristic where "an individual's rank and status in the workplace or society at large are of no import. Acceptance and participation is not contingent on any prerequisites…or proof of membership," (Oldenburg, 1999 as cited in Steinkühler & Williams, 2006, p. 890). This was not the case with Empire and its in-game hierarchies, fragmented community, and group identification. Players are sometimes selective of who they associate and play with, in addition to respecting and bullying others based on their payment status. These types of practices and behaviors again reflect real-world socioeconomic factors.

Moreover, third places are described as being accessible: "accommodating to those who frequent them," (ibid, p. 890). While Empire, like many other F2P games, is easy to access at the start, as players continue towards the later stages, advancement slows down and progress at an acceptable pace is only possible for those making microtransactions. This proves that these types of games are not really as accessible as they are marketed as being. Additionally, the in-game environment is anything but accommodating, with constant warfare and bullying. The same can also be said concerning accommodation from GGS itself. While the company attempts to cater to its players, whether through services or game updates, this does not happen for the entire community, and is only targeted at valued high-spending players.

Third places are also characterized as having a low profile, "characteristically homely and without pretension," (Oldenburg, 1999 as cited in Steinkühler & Williams, 2006, p. 890). In Empire, the preoccupation with achievement, whether skill or money based, is rampant, overwhelming its game community. Players are constantly debat-

ing the P2W or skill aspect of the game, individuals' achievements or their purchasing, making the environment full of pretension and self-importance.

Finally, third places are described as having a playful mood, which is "marked by frivolity, verbal word play, and wit," (Oldenburg, 1999 as cited in Steinkühler & Williams, 2006, p. 890). Aside from the extremely hostile environment in Empire, social interaction did not seem to be based on these aspects, but rather to be mostly functional. Player communication mostly consisted of informing each other of incoming attacks or plans. While there was socialization, it did not revolve around wit or world play, but typically around users' private lives, and then only in a shallow and straightforward manner.

Due to all of the differences observed, it can be safely concluded that Empire and similar F2P games do not operate as third places, signaling the dissimilarity of F2P game culture from traditional, pay-to-play culture. While not all traditional games function as third places, a majority of online multiplayer ones do, or at least they have a bulk of the characteristics described. However, Empire, and possibly other aggressively monetized games from F2P culture, do not, showing them to be conceivably less escapist and neutral spaces than traditional games are.

6.4.   Individual and Industry Practices

Unlike company or community practices, individual and industry practices stress the differences of Empire's (and F2P's) culture from traditional game culture, through pinpointing actions that suggest increased consumerism, making it more akin to a consumer culture, rather than a participatory one. The most revealing individual practice differentiating Empire (and F2P) game culture from traditional culture is its preoccupation with microtransactions.

Much of the gameplay in Empire (and most other F2P games) revolves around the act of purchasing and consumption. This is not only reflected in the need to acquire premium items and currency to assist in beating other players or improving in-game status, but also in how players manage their own spending behavior. There is an urge for uncontrollable spending in players, which was explicitly stated by several Empire players (see Subchapter 5.4.1.1.). These players clearly said that should they have no other responsibilities, they would willingly spend endlessly on the game. However, this is not the case, and Empire players therefore have to budget both their in-game and their out-of-game spending, curbing excess consumption tendencies. This practice is something which does not often take place in traditional game cultures, or at least in those without microtransactions.

Moreover, in addition to budgeting, Empire players are also preoccupied with in-game sales, always on the lookout for 'prime times': when in-game currency is at its cheapest. They do this so they can make a purchase and exchange their real world, hard-earned money for the greatest amount of virtual currency they can acquire. In addition to providing deals on currency, prime times also offer sales on both decorative and functional items. Overall, the Empire players observed spend much of their time in the game unceasingly engrossed with shopping activities, something very characteristic of consumer culture (McAllister, 2003).

What is also indicative of consumer culture is the individual practice of identifying with virtual items (and properties) that have been purchased, instead of game narratives or characters. This practice was constantly observed in Empire, marking it as distinct from traditional game culture(s). The same practice also applies to overall F2P game culture, at least in those games with weaker narratives and less identifiable characters. The Empire players interviewed were strongly attached to their virtual possessions and expressed concern over losing ownership of them. Even GGS employees who did not enjoy playing the game showed some minor attachment to their virtual properties, stating that they would feel frustration if they had to begin all over again due to hacking or technical issues.

Curiously, no interviewed participants noted likable characters or storylines from Em-pire as their favorite aspect of the game. Unlike traditional, pay-to-play game culture, where games often have immersive narratives and likeable characters for users to identify with, Empire only offers its users virtual items, rewards for their labor, or tem-porary financial investments. While this might not be true for F2P culture in general, it is quite common for several F2P games. Only a minority of these games have well established narratives or interesting characters to identify with, e.g. Guild Wars 2 or Heroes of the Storm.

Finally, a practice of individuals in Empire game culture, one that marks it as different from traditional game culture, is the lack of production of user-generated content (UGC). Traditional pay-to-play and subscription game cultures almost always have plenty of fandom. Along with this fandom comes a surplus of user-generated art, fic-tion, and helpful guides or tutorial content. Within the Empire game community, this was completely lacking. While a few helpful external resources generated by players did exist, they were scarce, rarely updated, and paled in comparison to the resources of other traditional game culture(s). This is possibly characteristic of F2P game cul-ture, meaning that several other games similar to Empire are the same. However, it still does not apply to all games within this meso-level culture definition, as several other F2P games with larger fanbases generate plenty of UGC.

These other F2P games, interestingly enough, also provide more immersive narra-tives and characters to identify with (Guild Wars 2, League of Legends, etc.), gener-ating an abundance of user-generated content, ranging from art, to fiction, detailed guides and tutorials. One possible reason for these exceptions is that they have a more accommodating community, although this is highly doubtful, as multiplayer are-na games (League of Legends) are generally known for having toxic communities (Kwak, Blackburn & Han, 2015). The most likely reason is that these game micro-cultures are less aggressively monetized than other F2P games in the meso culture and have an abundance of content, allowing users to participate and appropriate the game in ways other than simple shopping (microtransactions) and consumption. A greater amount of UGC production is an indication of participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006), hence for Empire and other F2P micro cultures lacking in UGC, this is a con-trasting indication.

Similar to individual practices, industry practices also distinguish Empire (and F2P) culture as something different from traditional, pay-to-play culture: more consump-tion-oriented than participatory. This is true even if the overall games industry can be considered a commercialized, profit-centric industry, just like many other entertain-ment industries. Still, looking at non-F2P games, one can identify that in addition to regular console titles meant for generating profit, there are an abundance of inde-

pendently developed games (Undertale, Stardew Valley and Celeste), with innovative gameplay mechanics, character designs and narratives. Even if these games have had critical and financial success, that might not have been their original purpose; they could have been created thoughtfully and passionately by their developers, akin to independent movies or art films.

On the other hand, F2P games are almost always developed with financial gain in mind. That is the basis for utilizing the payment model: luring players with the appeal of free access and having them spend endlessly on microtransactions. Even with the existence of some indie F2P games not meant to turn a profit (Meat Boy, Deltarune and Spelunky Classic), the most available and accessible ones, those which dominate the market, offer slight variations of the same gameplay (known as clones) packaged with different storylines, or graphics.

The overabundance of game clones on various app markets is one of many indicators of lacking industry regulation in F2P game culture, something that is certainly not true of traditional, pay-to-play or subscription game culture. The Apple and Google app stores are flooded with F2P games that work almost exactly the same way, the only difference being in the game's design or story. One notable example is the game Flappy Bird, which at one point had up to 800 different clones, such as Flappy Bats, Flappy Cat and Flappy Turd (Sherman, 2014). In addition to not regulating clones, F2P games were allowed to be marketed on game platforms as completely free, which is technically deceptive considering the various microtransactions that need to be made for decent progress to occur after a certain point. It was not until recently that F2P games (and other applications) with microtransactions were no longer allowed to be called free on Apple's app store. They are now labeled as having 'in-app purchases' instead. This change only transpired in 2014, after Apple came under pressure from the European Commission (Curtis, 2014), one of the only organizations attempting to protect F2P game consumers.

Even though the in-app transactions of F2P games are clearly labeled on certain platforms, a debate currently rages concerning the regulation of these microtransactions. Aside from uncontrollable spending, such as the one player who spent $10,000 (Gach, 2017), certain microtransactions in F2P games are completely randomized: players increasingly pay for a mystery box that might contain extremely rare or mundane items. These types of transactions, generally named 'loot boxes', have been compared to gambling and deemed inappropriate for environments frequented by children and teens (Campbell, 2018). Most F2P games that have loot boxes offer exclusive items (usually ones that function as status indicators), unattainable outside of these purchases, encouraging users to continuously make microtransactions, so they keep trying their luck until they have got what they wanted.

Loot box microtransactions have been largely unregulated in the F2P industry. Only recently, after a massive scandal concerning Star Wars Battlefront's use of loot boxes, has the American Federal Trade Commission (FTC) pledged to launch an investigation into the practice of loot boxes (Campbell, 2018). One step ahead of the USA, the Netherlands gaming authority (Kansspelautoriteit) has already put certain regulations in place concerning these sorts of microtransactions. If loot box content can be transferred to other users, or traded for cash, it is considered as being similar to gambling from the authority's point of view, and therefore is now illegal in the Netherlands ("Loot boxes & Netherlands Gaming Authority's findings", 2019). Nevertheless, the majority of microtransactions in F2P culture (both loot boxes and others) are still widely unregulated, with only a handful of laws existing in Japan, Belgium and the Netherlands so far (Campbell, 2018).

Even though there have been attempts to regulate microtransactions in some countries, other ethically questionable development practices, frequently observed in Empire, such as the abuse of dark patterns or mental trickery, are not even on the agenda of any organization. In fact, the industry is currently in the process of patenting new methods that incentivize purchasing, which might be against the interests of consumers. One example is a matchmaking battle system between players that pairs them in such a way as to encourage microtransactions. This system analyzes "player trends such as latency and weapon preference in order to place them in scenarios that might lead them to buy certain items," (Alexandra, 2017, n.p). Hence, not only do most questionable developer practices go unregulated in the F2P industry (many of which were seen in Empire and can also surely be seen in other aggressively monetized F2P games), but newer methods are also being proposed, driving more purchasing without consumer protection in mind.

Overall, practices from these four spheres (industry, individual, company and community) emphasize characteristics that differentiate F2P game culture (not just Empire) as something distinct from traditional, pay-to-play or subscription game culture. F2P culture can be seen as something completely separate from traditional and subscription game cultures: a parallel meso-level game culture, and part of the overall macro-game culture. However, it is important to note that certain characteristics are not applicable to all games within the F2P game culture. Free-to-play games that are not as aggressively monetized as Empire might not have the same community characteristics or practices, possibly functioning as third places or having immersive narratives that might generate more UGC. These different practices might lead players to identify with characters instead of virtual items, and could result in less of a consumer culture. Therefore, while the freemium payment model does drive certain transformations that distinguish F2P culture (monetized meritocracy, non-third places, consumer culture, lack of regulation), there are certainly always exceptions.

6.5.   Commercialization: From F2P to the Macro Game Culture

The practices mentioned above apply to a majority of games within F2P game cul-
ture, indicating it as something distinct and unique from traditional pay-to-play or
subscription cultures. Nevertheless, even with F2P culture as something separate
from traditional game culture, it could still possibly have a commercializing influence
on it, as well as on worldwide macro game culture, otherwise known as "The overall
culture of games, gamers and gameplay," (Elmezeny & Wimmer, 2018, p.82), due to
it being part of this macro culture. The noted transformation, which will be argued in
the following section, concerns how F2P culture drives the gaming industry to be
more profit-centric and users to be consumption-oriented. The influence F2P culture
might have on overall gaming culture can be attributed to several things, such as F2P
gaming's spread and its popularity and ease of access.

The reason F2P culture can have a commercializing influence on overall macro
game culture is because of the games' spread within the overall culture. F2P games,
and their cultures, make up a large portion of the games market today. These types
of game overwhelm the mobile app markets, existing on all game platforms, and are
much more common than traditional box-games, or even purchasable mobile games.
This could be partially attributed to what Juul (2010) termed the casualization of
game culture, or the growing market for casual games. Classically, F2P games pro-
vide a more casual experience: short bursts of play can be experienced by users
when and how they want. This leads us to another reason why F2P games might be
influential on the overall culture: their ease of access.

Free-to-play games can be accessed on almost any device: from PCs to consoles,
handhelds, tablets and even wearables. The majority of F2P games are also not
graphically demanding and require only basic devices to operate. Users do not need
the latest equipment to play them, making them accessible to those with outdated
phones or computers. Furthermore, and most obviously, F2P games are *free*, mean-
ing that even if players are not able to progress at an acceptable rate, become com-
petitive, or even reach the final stages of the game, they can still access the core
game itself and have some kind of gameplay experience.

The final aspect which contributes to F2P culture's influence on the overall macro
game culture is the popularity of certain F2P games with players and the freemium
model itself with developers. Some free-to-play games, like DOTA2 for example,
have communities of up to one million gamers playing simultaneously (Bozhenko,
2019). However, more astonishingly, and emphasizing the popularity of F2P games,
are the large sums awarded for some of these games' e-sports tournaments. DOTA
2 surpassed any other game in history, setting the world record with its prize pool for
the 2018 international tournament at $24.8 million (Makuch, 2018). This is especially

noteworthy as DOTA 2 has a system of crowdfunding its prize pool for tournaments from the community itself by selling items in the game to the player community.

Not only are certain F2P games extremely popular (e.g. Fortnite, Players Unkown Battle Grounds, League of Legends, Hearthstone, Heroes of the Storm and DOTA 2) but the freemium model itself is becoming tremendously popular among developers. This is not without reason. Freemium has become "the dominant revenue model in the top grossing applications chart," (Alha et al., 2014, p.1). Hence, it makes sense that many developers have an extremely positive outlook on the model itself (ibid), choosing to implement it more often in their games. In fact, the F2P model has gained so much in popularity among developers that industry giants who were tradi-tionally focused on console titles have begun concentrating on the mobile market, publishing multiple freemium games as well. Indie developers have long used the model as a way to promote their games and brand among players, while making a meager profit or accepting contributions. Now, however, veterans like Nintendo are utilizing the model to push their own intellectual properties (Pokémon, Mario, Fire Emblem) and connect them with their traditional pay-to-play games. Therefore, the profit, attention and communities being generated by F2P games are not to be ig-nored.

The payment model's popularity, as well as F2P games' ease of access and spread, might assist F2P culture in having a commercialization influence on overall macro game culture. For a large majority of individuals, their first gaming experience will now be with F2P games. These are not only children and young adults just beginning to play games, but also older people exposed to the medium for the first time. This is primarily due to the increasing penetration of smartphones and handheld devices (Newzoo, 2018), as well as the casualization of the gaming industry (Juul, 2010), which targets the regular consumer more than hardcore gamers. For these individu-als, they will come to understand F2P games and their cultural characteristics as the normal state of game culture. Previously established notions and ideas of game cul-ture as participatory and a space for sociability or user-generated content, or as be-ing somewhere that serves as a functioning third place, will become a thing of the past. Traditional game cultures will only be a rare experience offered to the occa-sional few that venture outside of the F2P game catalogue. Furthermore, for those that eventually leave F2P culture and join traditional pay-to-play and subscription game cultures, they will not come to expect practices and characteristics that differ from those found in F2P games. They will not be used to less consumer-oriented and more participatory play, a more intact magic circle and better functioning third places.

Not only will the majority of an entire new generation of gamers (the consumer side of macro game culture) have begun their journey with F2P games, becoming ex-

posed to a more consumer-oriented and commercialized version of game culture, but they will also bring expectations of these F2P games with them into traditional gaming spheres. Should players choose to partake in traditional games, they might ultimately end up influencing the development side of the macro game culture as well. To accommodate the expectations F2P gamers bring with them into traditional games, developers could begin integrating characteristics of F2P games into traditional games (microtransactions to assist in pay-to-win for instance) or focus entirely on creating F2P games, better catering to the growing generation of new audiences. These sorts of changes are already beginning to occur in the games industry, with multiple developers integrating F2P game characteristics into their fully-priced traditional games, such as microtransactions, P2W and seasonal content.

The developer most especially recognized for these integrations is EA Games (Whitwam, 2018). Aside from its fiasco with Battle Front II, EA is known for continuously including F2P characteristics (microtransactions) in its sports games' series, like FIFA, NHL and Madden. Perhaps it only continues to engage in this kind of behavior because even though the player pays an initial price for the game, microtransactions have become the absolute norm in the current gaming environment, a fact confirmed by how often players are willing to purchase them in their games (Whitwam, 2018). The fact that players are willing to spend on microtransactions after having paid the full price of a game is also clear evidence of what a commercializing force F2P culture has been on the overall macro game culture, instilling shopping-like consumption play where it might not belong.

Overall, the exposure of younger generations to F2P games (and their unique cultural practices) due to their being widespread and popular, results in changes to the gaming industry. These changes are in fact catering to younger generations and their preference for or habit of engaging in F2P play. Nevertheless, the overwhelming exposure and changes to the industry underline the possible commercializing influence F2P culture has had on overall macro game culture. F2P culture lends specific consumer culture characteristics to the overall macro game culture, accentuating more shopping-like activities, and less participatory practices such as user-generated content or modding. F2P culture has also possibly motivated developers to integrate F2P game characteristics into their pay-to-play and subscription games, strengthening the profit-centric approach already existing within the industry, and hindering the few who still attempt to develop quality indie content. These changes are only beginning to slowly materialize now. However, with F2P gaining becoming ever more popular, perhaps the commercialization of game culture will be much more evident in the following years.

7.0. Conclusion

This research presented an ethnography of the free-to-play game Empire, developed and published by Goodgame Studios in Hamburg, Germany. The intention was to observe the various transformations the freemium payment model brings to a game's culture. Freemium in this study denotes a payment system delivering game access for free with various microtransactions within that provide both decorative and functional benefits. Through an 18-month ethnography of the Empire in-game community, which included participant observation, interviews with both game players and employees of Goodgame Studios, and a content analysis of forum posts, as well as news articles pertaining to the game and related matters, this study managed to pinpoint several interesting insights about F2P games, in addition to media and game cultures overall.

In answering "*how does the free-to-play payment model transform the various contexts of game culture?*" the practices of each context were first observed separately to note distinct manifestations of practices and phenomena as a result of the application of the F2P payment model. Several new practices that had not been witnessed in games with traditional payment models (pay-to-play and subscription) were seen in multiple contexts of Empire's game culture, such as: tiered customer service ([re]production), player hierarchies based on payment (appropriation) and grouping with payment classes (identification). Moreover, undesirable practices existing in traditional games (bullying, dark patterns in game design) were seen to be exacerbated in Empire, and participatory practices (such as user-generated content) diminished. When answering how the free-to-play model transforms the various contexts of game culture, one can note that the model *transforms various contexts through establishing new practices not present in game cultures with traditional payment models. This transformation also includes increasing some consumerist practices and lessening some participatory practices found in traditional game cultures.*

The research also highlighted some notable findings concerning the interaction of practices within these cultural contexts, which provides knowledge about Empire culture, as well as F2P, regular game and media cultures overall. To be more specific, in answering the second research question of "*how do the various game culture contexts of an F2P game transform each other?*", precise connections between practices were analyzed to understand how they contributed to other practices or phenomena. This examination led to the spectrum of contextual relationships, where interactions between as little as two and as many as five contexts resulted in a variety of cultural phenomena or practices that are considered transformations from game cultures with traditional payment models. Examples of these transformations include the relation-

ship between appropriation and identification, where spending habits change how players feel about their purchased content and how they resume their purchasing behavior, or the cycle between employee identity, in-game regulation and Empire's image in media and public discourse, where the way employees identify changes in-game regulation tactics, and therefore impacts the game's image in gamer communities and the mainstream media. These relationships between contexts occur as a result of interacting practices which could happen either in one direction, back and forth or in multiple routes, depending on the number of contexts and practices involved. In answering how the various game culture contexts of an F2P game transform each other, one can pinpoint *that the cultural practices within these contexts interact in multiple ways, forming various relationships and can be placed on a spectrum. The relationships result in cultural practices or phenomena which can be described as characteristic of free-to-play game culture*. The reason these practices are characteristic of F2P game culture is because the contextual relationships (and resulting practices) are assumed to appear in several F2P games other than Empire, and not as commonly in games utilizing traditional payment models.

With several noted different practices across the various contexts of culture, as well as contextual relationships and interactions resulting in phenomena not present in game cultures with regular payment models, the observed culture of Empire presented something distinctive from previously witnessed game cultures with traditional payment models. Empire's culture and practices were compared to similar ones utilizing the freemium payment model, and it was observed that others shared numerous matching characteristics, leading to the assumption that a meso-level (Elmezeny & Wimmer, 2018) F2P game culture could be possible. While there are several mutual characteristics shared by Empire and other F2P games across multiple genres and levels of aggressive monetization, the most prominent ones come from the context of (re)production, appropriation and regulation. To be specific, these characteristics are: the abuse of dark patterns of game design in an attempt to increase user spending in the game, which includes monetary (monetized rivalries), temporal (grinding) and social capital (integrated social media incentives); an increased focus on consumption and purchasing in gameplay as compared to traditional gameplay, e.g. microtransactions and in-game currency; and the noninstitutionalized regulation of in-game transactions, leading to several debates about game features such as 'loot boxes' and exorbitant player spending.

Through surveying existing literature on other games and cultures, it was observed that F2P game culture is distinct from previous forms utilizing traditional payment models (pay-to-play or subscription). This was made clear from the difference in cultural practices between F2P game culture and traditional pay-to-play or subscription game culture. While there are several variations between F2P and game culture with

classic forms of payment, the most prominent transformations seen concerned the practices from the contexts of appropriation and (re)production, which manifested due to this payment model itself. These practices include in-game player hierarchies based on payment, where players are ranked, bully and befriend each other based on how much money they are spending on the game; a less participatory and more consumer-oriented community, where there is less user-generated content and more consumption focused gameplay; and profit-centric game development and community management, where producers are almost exclusively focused on generating income rather than on fostering and growing their userbase. These practices might not apply to the entire repertoire of F2P games, however they do manifest in several and are a transformation for the skill-based hierarchies, participatory and sometimes indie development found in games with traditional payment models.

Nevertheless, even while distinct from game cultures with traditional payment models, F2P culture is still part of the overall macro game culture, the one participated in by all players, games and the industry worldwide (Elmezeny & Wimmer, 2018). Additionally, given the popularity of F2P games, their culture can be seen to have a commercializing influence on overall macro culture, changing both industry and individual practices. For example, newcomers to the gaming world will have their first experiences with F2P games, shaping their expectations and practices to those found in these types of games. Already aware of these transformations, gaming developers are catering to this new generation of gamers by producing more F2P games and content than the traditional kind, as well as integrating F2P features into games with traditional payment models. This is perhaps the best example of the transformative influence F2P culture has on overall macro culture, when characteristics of F2P games begin to manifest in games with traditional payment models, such as pay-to-play or subscription games with microtransactions and loot boxes.

In addition to insights into free-to-play culture, its distinct characteristics and transformation from game cultures with traditional payment models, this research has also contributed to an existing and expansive body of scientific literature on both game and media cultures. The study has indicated that cultural practices in Empire, and possibly other game or media cultures, are not always the result of a specific context of the circuit of culture (du Gay et al., 1997). Instead, individual cultural practices or habits are sometimes the result of several interactions of separate practices from multiple different contexts, such as feelings of pride or shame experienced by gamers for the microtransactions they make (interactions between the appropriation and identification contexts). Furthermore, the commonly interlinked relationship between the contexts of appropriation and identification was repeatedly emphasized in this research. These two contexts were seen to transform each other quite frequently, with their practices interacting more regularly than any other context. While this might

be unique to Empire, using the game as a case example with greater demonstrative value (Alasuutari, 1996), one can posit that this connection between appropriation and identification exists in other game and media cultures. Since game cultures are a sub-type of media culture whose way of mediated communication manifests through consoles, this relationship could also be considered possible for other types of media cultures that revolve around different kinds of entertainment and communication.

Finally, this research also proposed a new kind of game culture, or subculture: that of free-to-play games. The culture envisaged has distinct practices due to both *technological and social arrangements*, such as the freemium payment model, company infrastructures (backend customer services software) and smartphone penetration. The culture also has *individual or group practices*, e.g. purchasing habits or efforts in cooperative regulation. Both these aspects combined (technological and social) provide new cultural practices which appear to signify the transformation of game culture from the traditional expressions present before. This proves not only interesting in defining and labeling a new form of game and media culture, but also as a case example of certain metaprocesses (commercialization).

Through observing various practices across every context of game culture in Empire and comparing them to similar games, the shared practices of F2P games are seen to be excessively commercialized. As specified in this research, this commercialization is mostly shaped by the payment model. However, it is interesting to postulate whether the commercialization processes also suggest the evolution of consumer culture. F2P culture could be considered a digitalized version of consumer culture, where individuals now have the choice of spending their hard-earned money on virtual dragons and suits of armor instead of new sneakers and beauty products. This type of virtual consumerism (Lehdonvirta et al., 2009), while damaging to the state of game culture, could possibly be beneficial to the environment, reducing waste and unnecessary physical purchases. Likewise, due to this commercialization, F2P culture could also very much potentially be a prime case example of the mediatization process. Not only does it emphasize the increasing amount of both time and money spent on media, but it also indicates the constant preoccupation and communication with media, as well as its integration into an individual's daily routine.

7.1.   Limitations and Future Work

There are a few limitations to the research which will be discussed in the following section. Additionally, this section will deal with other investigations which could be undertaken in the future, stemming from this study's findings.

Firstly, it is important to point out that online digital games, even F2P ones (Empire being an example), are constantly being updated and changed. These updates to the game can cause further transformations to the culture itself, as seen in the way the (re)production context can influence other contexts of culture. Hence, this case study is essentially only a snapshot of a particular moment in time, meaning that changes could occur to the game that reflect the company's understanding of the community, resulting in the application of less aggressive monetization and mechanics. This is certainly the case today, as Empire has become a far less aggressively monetized game than it was in 2015 or 2016. However, the specifics and mechanics of aggressive monetization in Empire noted in this research reflect the environment and culture of the game when the ethnography took place (2016-2018). Overall, this means that the culture of Empire (and similar games) is constantly transforming and evolving, and one can only pinpoint certain aspects of it at a particular point in time, which may or may not persist given changes to the core features of the game in the future. This is a limitation that is characteristic of any ethnography of a game which can be updated and patched. These games can be seen more as services than packaged products, due to their constantly evolving nature.

Nevertheless, this limitation does not contradict the findings of the study. In fact, the results concerning F2P game culture, and its various contexts, are still valid and apply not only to the culture of Empire during a specific time (which may have evolved given updates to the game), but also to a multitude of other F2P games facing a similar situation. Other free-to-play games that have the same business practices and aggressive monetization techniques as Empire, whether within the (re)production or regulation contexts, might also have a similar culture.

Still, Empire is a game with specific characteristics and mechanics. Not all the findings in this study apply to all F2P games. Practices described within the various contexts of Empire game culture might apply to a multitude of other F2P games, but most certainly not all of them. Some practices may appear in numerous other games, while others might only be applicable to games of the same genre, or those providing a multiplayer option, or even games that have the same level of aggressive monetization or consumer-oriented play. For example, practices concerning how players identify with each other, and arrange themselves in different social hierarchies, are only applicable to games where a multiplayer option is available, as well as in-game communication. Hence, these findings might not apply to other F2P games such as

Candy Crush, which only provide a single player mode. Additionally, findings concerning Empire practices in the (re)production or regulation contexts, which deal with excessively aggressive monetization (and the resulting contextual relationships) might apply to games like Fornite, but not others that attempt less commercialized approaches, putting consumer satisfaction and community growth over fiscal success, as Paths of Exile or Guild Wars 2 do, for example.

One final limitation to the study concerns the selection of interview participants. For the ethnography was done strategically to provide a "unified picture of different cultural logics," (Alasuutari, 1996, p.376). This strategic selection of participants was also done after participant observation was completed and specific gaps in data needed to be filled dealing with the five cultural contexts, which were not clearly observed. Even though the interviews continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, meaning that no new answers were being obtained from the interviews, the selection of participants is by no means representative of the entire Empire player base and culture. Having a non-representative sample could possibly mean that there are existing opinions and practices of other players that conflict with those mentioned in this study. These opinions and practices could belong to casual players, or those belonging to another sociodemographic, such as younger players, those of different genders, or those who hail from other countries. Nonetheless, following Alasuutari (1996) and Boellstorff et al.'s (2012) virtual ethnography approach, the selection of participants for the study, which resulted in interviews with both Empire gamers and employees of GGS, provided an accurate depiction of cultural practices from both the users' and producers' perspectives.

Concerning future research efforts that could stem from this study, there are quite a few possibilities. Key findings of cultural practices can be taken from each context of Empire's game culture and compared directly to other F2P games. This would allow for a straight comparison of game cultures, as indicated in the framework for game cultural comparison (Elmezeny & Wimmer, 2018). Practices observed in Empire from one context, multiple contexts, and even contextual relationships themselves (see 5.7), can be directly compared to other F2P games, following the steps taken in the aforementioned framework. Comparisons can be made between games of other genres, single player games, or even those which are less aggressively monetized, to see if practices observed in Empire's culture persist and are characteristic of free-to-play culture in general, or if there are deviations that occur due to the genre, nature of play, or monetization of the game itself.

These future research efforts can either be done qualitatively, as recommended in the Elmezeny and Wimmer framework (2018), or quantitatively. The qualitative approach recommended in the framework is done through selecting and defining two

game cultures, specific contexts, and practices for comparison. However, should the studies be conducted quantitatively, this would permit the comparison of a larger sample of F2P games and players, allowing for more representative findings. To do this, instead of defining only two cultures for comparison, the researcher would define a specific category for games to be grouped and compared on the meso level, such as the meso-level definition applied with F2P game culture, traditional or subscription game cultures, in this study. Then, the researcher could collect data using a large-scale survey, with a representative sample, on the practices of multiple games that fit this specific meso-level culture definition.

Finally, one worthwhile research pursuit related to this research that could be conducted in the future is an investigation of the transformations the freemium payment model has on other media cultures, not just on F2P games. The payment model itself is utilized in a variety of additional media products and services, such as Spotify, or the indie art platform webtoon. It would be interesting to investigate whether similar practices to those observed in the contexts of Empire's culture also manifest in the contexts of other media cultures. How, for example, users develop online hierarchies in the community, choose to group with other users, identify with their purchased or free media products, or how media companies segment users through marketing and customer services.

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