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Let's Graduate –

A thematic analysis of the Let's Play phenomenon

Trondheim, May 2014

LET'S GRADUATE - THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF LET'S PLAYS

“There was a computer game, I was given it,
one of my friends gave it to me, he was playing it,
he said, it's brilliant, you should play it,
and I did, and it was.”

~ *Neil Gaiman, “Virus”*

“Never treat your audience as customers,
always as partners.”

~ *Jimmy Stewart*

Acknowledgements

I wish to start by thanking my supervisor Ingunn Hagen for providing good advice through the course of the project and connecting me to central actors within the field of videogames. I also wish to give special thanks to my parents, mostly due to the fact that without them I would not be where I am today neither figuratively nor literally. Thanks also to the Let's Play communities and art sites I had to frequent in order to obtain my information (it has been quite the journey), and naturally also to the informants who provided rich and detailed descriptions like I originally wanted. Lastly, thank you to everyone who agreed to read through this analysis to see if I truly understand people as well as I hope I do and any researcher who has the curiosity and drive to use this monograph for future research.

Best regards to all of you.

~ Kristoffer Fjællingsdal

LET'S GRADUATE - THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF LET'S PLAYS

Abstract

A thematic analysis was conducted in order to reveal and identify central themes composing the motivational aspects of the popular Let's Play media phenomenon. Nine informants with various connections to Let's Plays were interviewed online through the use of a 17-item interview survey developed by the researcher. A total of five major recurring themes were discovered relating to the informants' motivational reasons for making and viewing Let's Plays as part of their spare time activities. Based on these discoveries, it can be assumed that the Let's Play phenomenon contributes to modern-day need fulfillment relating to online socialization, entertainment, technological competence, commercialization and interpersonal relations between the media audience and the media personalities they follow. It was concluded that the Let's Play phenomenon, and the communities contained within it, holds potential for the future development of videogame industry as a whole as well as being an interesting new arena for media research in general. Implications for further research within the field of Let's Plays are therefore made in order to ensure the possibility of expanding the scientific knowledge surrounding this media phenomenon.

Keywords: Videogames, online socialization, virtual communities, Let's Play

Table of contents

Acknowledgements.....3

Abstract.....4

1 Introduction.....8

2 Theoretical foundations and framework.....10

 2.1 The Let's Play phenomenon in a nutshell.....10

 2.2 Let's Plays and the videogame industry.....11

 2.3 Let's Play communities on the Internet.....12

 2.4 Let's Plays and social networking.....13

 2.5 Let's Plays, creative work and reward motivation.....15

 2.6 Gaming motivations.....16

 2.7 Gaming psychology and a new social gaming dimension.....19

3 Method and Procedure.....20

 3.1 Participants and recruitment.....20

 3.2 Material.....21

 3.2.1 *Interview survey*.....21

 3.2.2 *Websites and literature*.....22

 3.3 Design.....22

 3.4 Procedure.....23

 3.4.1 *Stage 1 – Data familiarization*.....23

 3.4.2 *Stage 2 – Initial coding stage*.....23

 3.4.3 *Stage 3 – Turning codes into themes*.....24

 3.4.4 *Stage 4 – Theme refinement*.....24

LET'S GRADUATE - THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF LET'S PLAYS

3.4.5 Stage 5 – Theme naming and definition.....	24
3.5 Ethical Considerations.....	25
4 Results and Discussion.....	26
4.1 Media Content.....	26
4.1.1 Need for media content.....	26
4.1.2 Need for entertaining content.....	27
4.2 Social Factors.....	28
4.2.1 Social networking.....	28
4.2.2 Partaking in a virtual community.....	29
4.2.3 Hearing someone's voice.....	30
4.2.4 Let's Play meet-ups.....	31
4.2.5 Depression relief.....	32
4.3 Commercial Factors.....	32
4.3.1 Monetized Let's Plays.....	33
4.3.2 Let's Plays as detailed game reviews.....	34
4.3.3 Let's Plays as purchase portals.....	35
4.3.4 Discovering new games through Let's Plays.....	36
4.4 Role of Technology.....	37
4.4.1 Inability to play due to technological limitations.....	37
4.4.2 Obscure or retro games.....	38
4.4.3 Technological knowledge.....	39
4.4.4 Bad games vs. good games.....	40
4.4.5 Specific game genres as niches.....	41

LET'S GRADUATE - THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF LET'S PLAYS

4.4.6 <i>Let's Plays across websites</i>	41
4.5 Role of the Let's Player.....	42
4.5.1 <i>Let's Player as comedian</i>	43
4.5.2 <i>Let's Player as critic</i>	44
4.5.3 <i>Let's Player as emotional</i>	44
4.5.4 <i>Let's Player as reference person</i>	45
4.5.5 <i>Let's Player as a skilled gamer</i>	46
4.5.6 <i>Let's Player as Internet "celebrity"</i>	46
4.5.7 <i>Let's Player as disturbance</i>	47
4.6 Discussion of results.....	48
5 Limitations and Future Research.....	52
5.1 Limitations of the study.....	52
5.1.1 <i>Sample Size Issues</i>	52
5.1.2 <i>Data Saturation</i>	53
5.1.3 <i>Interview Design</i>	54
5.2 Implications for future research.....	55
6 Conclusion.....	56
7 References.....	58
8 Appendixes.....	67

1 Introduction

The following monograph is the result of a deductive qualitative thematic analysis of the social videogame phenomenon known as Let's Play, conducted for my Master's thesis at the Department of Psychology at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim. The project was initiated in May 2013, and is based on theoretical and empirical foundations acquired through qualitative interviews, public online documents such as blog posts, journal articles and other relevant literature.

The background for choosing to write about videogame communities on the Internet stems from Mortensen's (2009) call for more reports about videogames from practitioners of psychology who benefit from a close relationship with gaming from before. The research was also inspired by a general interest in the future development of the videogame industry, as well as the shift from understanding the gamer as a passive and uncritical recipient of a game's moral content to an active user of videogames as a social networking resource. Since the videogame crash of 1983 (Ernkvist, 2006), it has been made clear that the gaming industry is nowhere near as invulnerable as gamers of today might think. It is a highly competitive business arena with selective and dedicated consumers, and creative innovations during the development of new consoles and games need to be considered at all times in order to stay afloat on the market. One such creative innovation came in the form of allowing gamers to socialize with one another through means of online communication and networking (Cairns, Cox, Day, Martin, & Perryman, 2013). Schell (2008) contends that social games can contribute to fulfilling social needs, particularly through making gamers feel like part of a *community*. In fact, some of the most popular online games such as *World of Warcraft*, *League of Legends*, *Counter-Strike* and even *Garry's Mod* have communities formed around them. Additionally, with the gradual popularization of gaming platforms like *Steam*, several other gaming communities have recently appeared around lesser-known, obscure videogames from independent developers.

In tandem with an increase in game-related social communities and the added possibility of forming social networks with other people playing videogames, the stereotypical view of gamers as teenage boys has changed drastically. In the course of the *Daedalus* Project, Yee (2014) found that the average gamer is a person in his or her late twenties or early thirties with more or less normal everyday lives, sometimes with full-time jobs and sometimes with their own families. Only about 20% of the gamers in his studies

LET'S GRADUATE - THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF LET'S PLAYS

were teenage boys, and the age range varied immensely from eleven years of age to sixty-eight. The informants were also varied in regard to their occupations, with some being computer technicians and others being criminal defense lawyers. Yee's findings are further supported by statistics from the *Entertainment Software Association* (2012).

In Norway however, videogame research has largely been focused on the *frequency of videogame usage* rather than *who's playing the games*. As a result, the average gamer in Norway is considered to be decidedly younger than his or her North American counterpart (St. meld nr. 14, 2007-2008). Mortensen (2009) found that the average Norwegian gamer by age was a young male between the ages of 9 and 24. She describes the gaming crowd as "nuanced", and points to the fact that there are few, if any, definite statistics to prove exactly what constitutes a typical gamer. As a result of these mixed findings, it is clear that gamers are a varied crowd and should be treated as such during the conduct of research. However, despite the large amount of variance in gamer personalities, there are similarities that tend to group gamers together. For instance, Bartle (1996, 2014) found that gamers can roughly be divided into four separate categories depending on why they choose to play games. While Bartle's four player types will be discussed in the subsequent chapters, they are interesting to mention here due to one player type in particular; the *socializer*. Socializers use games merely as a common ground where they can meet up with other players and exchange conversation. Therefore, the game becomes second to the person playing it. While this is an interesting finding in its own right, it becomes even more intriguing when applied to the virtual gaming phenomenon known as *Let's Plays*.

The earliest known examples of Let's Plays were text- and image based and originated from the *Something Awful Forums* when a member of the forums uploaded a screenshot-based Let's Play of the computer game known as *Oregon Trail*. The earliest known movie-based Let's Play featuring actual in- game motion and audio commentary was uploaded by Something Awful member *Slowbeef* in 2007, and was a complete walkthrough of *The Immortal* for the *Nintendo Entertainment System* (Slowbeef, 2013). Since then the Let's Play phenomenon has grown considerably, and a YouTube search for the term "*let's play*" yields around 7,5 million hits as of February 3rd, 2014. To further cement the impact of the Let's Play phenomenon on online gaming culture, several of YouTube's most subscribed accounts are dedicated to Let's Plays such as *PewDiePie*, *TobyGames* and *SeaNanners* (Statsheep, 2014). Due to the rapid increase in its popularity, the Let's Play phenomenon warrants research by anyone wanting to establish a foothold in the gaming industry.

LET'S GRADUATE - THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF LET'S PLAYS

The general purpose of this project has been to unveil underlying themes that make up the backbone of the Let's Play phenomenon in order to understand what motivates people to produce and view Let's Play-related material, as well as how Let's Plays can contribute to the future development of the videogame industry. By creating a general overview of this phenomenon, implications for future in-depth research are also made possible. To ensure the interdisciplinary validity of the study, research within the fields of media psychology, social psychology, communication, social networking and videogame theory was conducted to ensure informational validity as well as offering a wide scope of different points of view in regard to the phenomenon being researched. To compliment this, the informants were also chosen to represent a diverse set of viewpoints and sociocultural backgrounds, and some were also requested to validate the information provided.

2 Theoretical Foundations and Framework

2.1 The Let's Play Phenomenon in a nutshell

As previously mentioned, the first known Let's Plays originated from the Something Awful forums. They consisted of series of images showing the player's gradual progress through the game, combined with colorful descriptions and comments provided by the player about their general experience of said progress. This early form of Let's Plays allowed the player to double as an author of a complex narrative, providing in-depth descriptions of their experience with each individual part of a game. With the introduction of video to the Let's Play phenomenon, the player's audience was given an audiovisual experience in addition to the player's own narrative. As a result, screenshot-based Let's Plays have become rare, although some examples still remain on certain websites (The Let's Play Archive, 2014).

What exactly is a Let's Play? Social media sites have developed several definitions of what constitutes a typical Let's Play, although variations do occur. The popular media site *Reddit* (2014) defines a Let's Play as "one or more people that record themselves playing video games through screenshots or captured video". They also add that "usually Let's Play videos consist of jokes (Good, bad, and/or corny), frustration, and bewilderment by the ones playing. Some also explain gameplay, easter eggs, and general trivia pertaining to the game being played". In a similar vein, the FAQ section of the Let's Play Archive (2014) claims that Let's Plays "show a video game being played while the player talks about what they're doing

in commentary with video, screenshots or both". *Minecraft* developer Dinnerbone (2012) writes that Let's Plays will become an important future tool of reference for game developers when they want to understand the mindset of a gamer, as well as a good source of commercialization assuming that the game is considered to be entertaining by the Let's Player's audience. Additionally, Let's Plays are often uploaded to video sharing websites where one can subscribe to the Let's Player, leave comments and feedback and message the Let's Player privately, such as *YouTube* and *Twitch*.

While several of these Let's Plays are produced by amateurs, sometimes fall under the category of user-generated content (Cha, 2012) and are uploaded to large and popular media websites, some Let's Players also construct and manage their own dedicated websites where they upload unique and exclusive content for their followers. As a result, several smaller communities may branch out and take shape as parts of a larger whole. For instance, discovering a Let's Player on YouTube could lead a dedicated fan to pursue other sources of content that the Let's Player owns or manages, such as personal websites or alternate accounts used for uploading different material. The need for more media content, the drive and motivation to pursue these needs as well as a gradual development of social networks and community-specific norms are signs that a sense of virtual community (SOvC) is building (Blanchard & Markus, 2002; Chiu, Hsu & Wang, 2006; de Valck, van Bruggen & Wierenga, 2009; Dholakia, Bagozzi & Pearo, 2004; Tonteri, Kosonen, Ellonen & Tarkiainen, 2011).

2.2 Let's Plays and the videogame industry

In the early 1980s, while the videogame industry was still relatively young, the market was being flooded by competing consoles and games. The home computer was making its entry onto the stage, and gaming companies were largely copying and incorporating the successful designs and playability of Atari games into their own products. The lack of differentiation between certain products that were released as well as games of questionable quality are contributing factors to what is commonly known in the videogame industry as the 1983 crash or Atari shock (Ernkvist, 2006). The videogame industry was slowly coming apart at the seams, and games were now considered to be little more than a fad for kids (Williams, 2006). To make matters worse, gamers at the time did not have the social networking capabilities that today's gamers do. Online game reviews were unheard of and even videogame magazines such as *Computer and Video Games*, although they did exist on the market (Kirkpatrick, 2012), were arguably less informative than modern-day media. As a

result, it became very difficult to determine whether a game was good or not, and gamers often relied on word of mouth to determine new purchases.

Today, the videogame industry has changed dramatically. In 2010 videogame sales outranked those of recorded music, and the industry has an 8.2% predicted annual growth rate between 2011 and 2015 (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith & Tosca, 2013). In 2012, the videogame industry in the US alone was valued at \$25 billion (Entertainment Software Association, 2012). Online games such as World of Warcraft began to flourish (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2013; Schell, 2008), thus cementing the gamer as a more or less social creature. Internet access became more readily available to consumers from the early 90s (Rainie & Wellman, 2012), making anything from online gaming, online commercialization and the formation of virtual communities possible. Subsequently, starting in the mid-2000s the search interest for Let's Plays began to increase shortly after the first video-based Let's Play was made accessible for public viewing online. Since then, the search interest for Let's Plays has increased tremendously and has not ceased to do so as of February, 2014 (see figure 1).

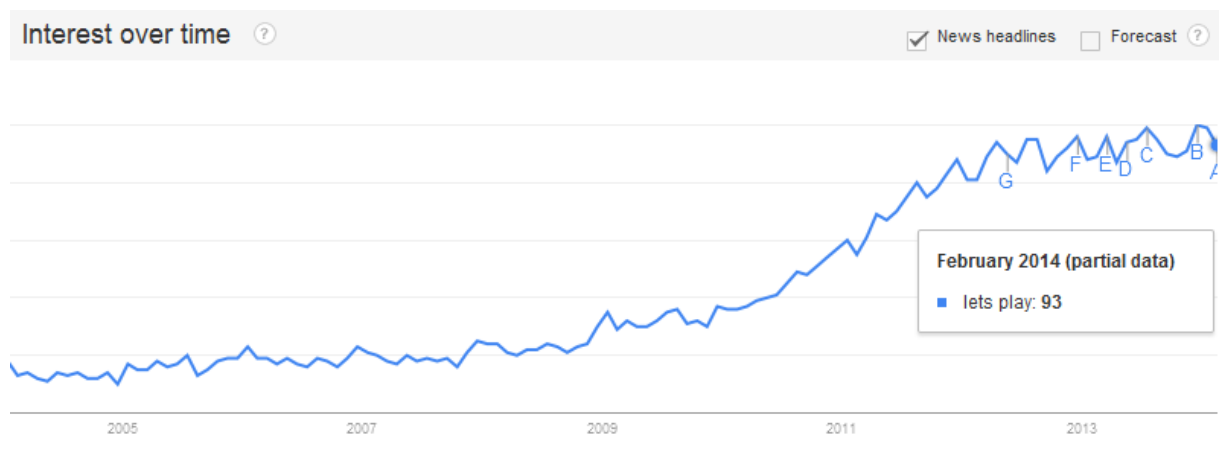


Figure 1: Let's Play Worldwide search interest 2005 – 2014. (Source: Google Trends, 2014)

2.3 Let's Play communities on the Internet

In the first known publication using the term 'virtual community', Rheingold (1987/2008) writes that a virtual community is "a group of people who may or may not meet one another face to face, and who exchange words and ideas through the mediation of computer bulletin boards and networks" (p. 3). He would later go on to write that virtual communities could be used to discuss specific subjects of interest and passion, and to find other people who share these interests and passions (Rheingold, 1993). Rheingold's description of virtual communities still hold strong today, particularly the defining quality of a

group of people gathering around and discussing a shared passion. This is known as an *interest-oriented virtual community* (Kannan, Chang & Whinston, 2000; Spaulding, 2010) and is found to be an important component in satisfaction and commitment among community members (Blanchard & Markus, 2002) as well as a determinant for successful virtual communities in general (Lin, 2008). Using the definition provided above, it should be clear that Let's Plays meet the definition for interest-oriented communities; they consist of groups of people sharing the same passion or interest for games, and they exchange information through the use of computers. This form of knowledge sharing behavior suggests the existence of a virtual community, and is normally guided by the individual members' belief that they can contribute something with this knowledge (Hsu, Ju, Yen & Chang, 2007). Furthermore, members of Let's Play communities seem to display some form of familiarity with each other through recognition by usernames, which is also indicative of a sense of community (Blanchard & Markus, 2002).

Supposing that the term 'bulletin board' encompasses modern-day equivalents such as Facebook Walls and the YouTube comment section, van Dijk (1997) concludes that a form of rudimentary community can emerge from interpersonal communication within such websites. He also postulates that virtual communities are unable to fully replace organic or 'face-to-face' communities, but rather serve a strengthening function on existing, real-life communities. Similar results have been found within certain gaming communities (Herodotou, Kambouri & Winters, 2014). One example of the form of online discussions and socializing that van Dijk describes is known as *parasocial interaction*, a sense of perceived friendship between media audiences and media personalities (Bartsch & Viehoff, 2010; Horton & Wohl, 1956/2006; Rubin & Perse, 1987) where the audience possesses intricate and detailed knowledge of the media figure but seldom vice versa (Stever, 2009). In order to establish closer social contacts between the Let's Play audience and the Let's Player, various Let's Play communities occasionally have what is commonly known as 'meet ups', where the Let's Players can mingle with their fans and other gamers.

2.4 Let's Plays and social networking

Previous research suggests that the core values of the individual, particularly related to their perception of the importance of a given topic, determines their willingness to upload media content for public viewing on the Internet (Park, Jung & Lee, 2011). Additionally, individual differences among the viewers such as their degree of interpersonal interaction and

LET'S GRADUATE - THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF LET'S PLAYS

sensation seeking predict their willingness to search for and watch media content (Haridakis & Hanson, 2009). From a uses and gratifications perspective, it is the motivations and needs of the users and providers of media content that determines the social and psychological impact the Internet has (Weiser, 2001). Drawing on this research by combining media needs, the production of media content and providing a social arena where online communication is made possible, websites such as YouTube makes the generation of social networks and virtual communities possible. Some users of these media websites tend to use them solely for viewing uploaded material instead of contributing to it (Hargittai & Walejko, 2008). However, one doesn't need to produce content oneself in order to be included as part of a virtual community. A typical distinction is made between active users who frequent and contribute to online message boards and forums (posters), and users who actively watch media content but does not leave any concrete feedback (lurkers). However, posters and lurkers are still considered to be vital parts of the virtual community in which they make use of the existing media content (de Valck et al., 2009; Tonteri et al., 2011).

In its most basic form, a virtual Let's Play community can be arranged as a hierarchy consisting of two separate parts; the Let's Player(s) and his/her/their audience. The Let's Player produces media content for the audience to enjoy, and is rewarded with feedback and attention, validation for their work as well as a reputation within the community where they belong. Positive feedback might in turn motivate the Let's Player to produce more and better content, thus creating a continuous cycle. Benefitting from these qualities are signs that a social network has been established (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). On the opposite end of the scale, the consumers of media content also make use of their social networks when it comes to immersing themselves in the gameplay and sharing games among their peers. For instance, gamers have been shown to be more emotionally involved and focused on the game when playing against a real-life person instead of a computer (Cairns et al., 2013; Weibel, Wissmath, Habegger, Steiner & Groner, 2008). Interestingly, these findings are consistent regardless of whether the other player is in the same room or not (Cairns et al., 2013). Immersion in the game is important, because it has been shown to predict future sharing behavior. When a game is immersive and engaging, the player becomes deeply physically and/or mentally involved in gameplay (Ermi & Mäyrä, 2005). When a game is perceived as enjoyable and immersive, it is also more likely to be shared among the player's social peers (Cohen, 2013) and to become part of popular culture (Lull, 2000).

2.5 Let's Plays, creative work and reward motivation

As mentioned in section 2.1, Let's Plays are made to be humorous, entertaining and to provide in-depth information about videogames. Previous research suggests that a person will be more inclined towards subjects that are perceived as interesting and valuable (Bartsch & Oliver, 2011). The intricate balance between providing entertaining content and educating media audiences about technological aspects of videogames places Let's Plays under the umbrella term 'edutainment' (Sorathia & Servidio, 2012). Supporting this view, Buckingham and Scanlon (2005) add that edutainment relies heavily on the extensive use of "visual material, on narrative or game-like formats, and on more informal, less didactic styles of address" (p. 46), central elements in most Let's Plays. In order to create something that successfully incorporates both an entertainment function as well as an educational dimension, it is important to think outside the box. In order to do this, it helps to be able to think *creatively*. Abuhamdeh and Csikszentmihalyi (2004) write that creativity springs out of a complex interaction between the individual and their artistic field of choice. They describe three core elements that need to be present in order for creative work to occur; a specific *domain* centered on a set of rules and procedures, a *field* where groups of individuals from the same domain come together as a whole, and finally the role of the *individual*. Adhering to this framework of creativity, it is relatively simple to place the Let's Play phenomenon into each of the three fundamental elements suggested here. The domain of Let's Plays is videogames, the field consists of Let's Players and their followers, and the role of the individual is centered around sharing Let's Plays with friends or commenting on Let's Play-related forums or bulletin boards.

Since the 1920's, the United States has experienced a steady increase in so-called creative class workers due to modernization of the workplace and the gradual trend towards using computers instead of heavy machinery (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). This form of creative and original work where the individual can realize their full potential has been shown to be an important step towards the achievement of self-realization (Tønnesvang, 2006). Nowadays, YouTube has allowed for monetization of certain videos on their website, supposing they follow the YouTube Terms of Service and Community Guidelines. This is known as the YouTube Partnership Program ("What is the YouTube Partner Program?", 2014). It could very well be a leading cause for many Let's Players to begin their careers with YouTube as a financial backer, although the exact income one could expect from becoming a YouTube Partner will vary. When a YouTube video is validated as eligible for monetization, YouTube

will place ads inside the video that will generate ad revenue for the uploader (“Monetization”, 2014). Considering that there are millions of people playing games at any moment in time (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2013), and that at least a certain percentage of these players will at some point develop an interest in videogames that goes beyond just playing the game, this ad revenue can become a solid source of income for the uploader of the video.

In his UIUC speech from 2005, *Something Awful* creator and Let's Player Richard “Lowtax” Kyanka said that “if you're trying to create a community on the Internet, you got to do it because you love doing it” (ZorakGoesOn, 2012). This view is supported by Park, Jung and Lee (2011) in that the amount of time and effort spent uploading content on the Internet is no big concern when creative expression is in question. While monetized Let's Plays can be a huge attraction, others tend to make Let's Plays because they enjoy the sense of community and entertaining others. Their reward does not come in the form of financial support, but rather through positive feedback and encouragement from their followers to create more Let's Plays. Positive feedback to a specific action or performance has been shown to increase the frequency of said action (Ryan & Deci, 2000), which in this case is the intention to upload media content to the Internet. Furthermore, if an experience is perceived to be good or positive, it is more likely to be shared among social peers (Gable, Reis, Impett & Asher, 2004; Kim & Phalak, 2012). This becomes important when compared to the tendency for people to perceive negative events as having larger impacts than positive events (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer & Vohs, 2001).

2.6 Gaming motivations

While the Let's Players and their audience make up the main bulk of the Let's Play phenomenon, it would be nonsensical not to consider aspects of the videogames themselves in the final analysis. In fact, videogames hold a tremendous potential impact on the human psyche for those who choose to play them. The act of playing versus not playing videogames has been connected to cognitive and somatic differences such as greater visual acuity in the form of discerning small objects (Latham, Patston & Tippett, 2013), lowered stress levels (Reinecke, 2009; Russoniello, O'Brien & Parks, 2009), increased degree of empathy towards others (Greitemeyer, Osswald & Brauer, 2010) and increased levels of dopamine release in the brain (Koepp et al., 1998) for the gamers. Furthermore, games can provide subjectively positive experiences (Schell, 2008) as well as an arena where the player can socialize with other players and temporarily disengage from real-life problems (Yee, 2006).

LET'S GRADUATE - THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF LET'S PLAYS

The drive and motivation to play videogames has changed through the course of history. The earliest known examples of digital games did not have the same technological capabilities that the more recent generations of games do, and mainly revolved around simple concepts such as getting a certain number of points in *Pac-Man* or defeating hostile in-game characters in *Bubble Bobble*. While these elements have largely been retained in modern-day videogames, they are refined and mixed together with improved graphics, soundtracks and storylines. Some games rely less on the narrative, however, and more on the player's personal interpretation of what goes on in the game (Jenkins, 2004). Thusly, games have evolved from being a collection of fairly simplistic digital constructs to a large-scale social and aesthetic phenomenon that has seriously captured the interest of media researchers (Aarseth, 2004).

In order to understand why some people feel motivated to seek out and watch Let's Plays, it might also help to understand why some people choose to seek out and play videogames themselves. Bartsch and Viehoff (2010) conclude that media entertainment needs to provide the consumer with a form of gratification in the form of fun, thought-provoking and often social experiences. It has also been found that individuals who score higher on basic psychological need satisfaction such as the need to feel competent and autonomous, are likely to have a more psychologically healthy relationship to playing videogames (Przybylski, Weinstein, Ryan & Rigby, 2009) as well as predicting the overall occurrence of future gameplay (Ryan, Rigby & Przybylski, 2006). Autonomy also becomes an important factor when it comes to playing a videogame as part of a guild. Players who are free to set their own in-game goals instead of having them established by a guild leader seem to score higher on levels of intrinsic motivation, or playing the game because they truly want to (Wang, Khoo, Liu & Divaharan, 2008). These findings are supported by Patall (2013), who writes that individuals with a high degree of personal interest in a task are more likely to experience a higher degree of autonomy.

The abovementioned findings further illustrate the importance of maintaining the employment of the uses and gratifications theory mentioned earlier. The continued focus of media researchers on peoples' perceived importance of various media is theorized to maintain its importance well into the future (Ruggiero, 2000). This is true for Internet research in general, and also when applied to more detail-oriented research fields such as virtual communities and human behavior in an online environment.

LET'S GRADUATE - THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF LET'S PLAYS

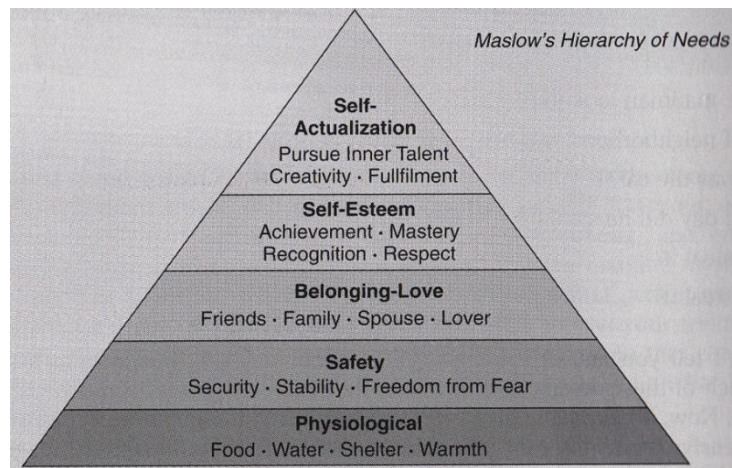


Figure 2: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Model. (Source: Schell, 2008)

Focusing more on the aspects of the game itself, Yee (2006) adds that games should provide the player with the ability to gain power, discover things other players have yet to experience, compete with other players and accumulate an understanding of the game's mechanics. His research shows that players are motivated to feel competent in the games they play, to be able to gain a certain status and reputation among fellow players and simultaneously grow their own social gaming networks through chatting, teamwork and in-game cooperation. His findings around competition, competence and socializing during gameplay are largely supported by Karlsen (2001). Abraham Maslow (1943/2000) explains human motivation through the process of need satisfaction, or finding objects or experiences which satisfy or eliminate existing needs. According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Model (see figure 2), the needs of recognition, respect by fellow social peers and achievement of personal goals all rank high on the scale. It could be worth considering that should these three needs coexist, this may be an indication that the gamer has entered the fifth and final level of need satisfaction through the pursuit of his or her inner talent.

While on the topic of need satisfaction, it could be worth mentioning Bartle's four player types. Bartle (1996, 2014) categorizes gamers according to their respective need to play. The four player types he has found are *Achievers*, *Explorers*, *Killers* and *Socializers*. Achievers are more likely to play a game because they want to beat it in its entirety, uncovering every secret area and completing every single optional quest. Explorers are usually more immersed in the aesthetic qualities of the game such as the graphics, design and music. Killers are largely playing to defeat opponents, while Socializers attempt to form social networks or become part of guilds or groups. Schell (2008) adds that such simple models of player categorization could result in overlooking other gaming motivations, and

therefore chooses to add deeper elements such as in-game gift giving, humor and even delight in another player's misfortune.

2.7 Gaming psychology and a new social gaming dimension

An important implication for the popularity and media value of Let's Plays is that gamers are a very varied crowd of people. Although the fact that individual gamers can get together as groups and form virtual communities is clearly evident, the formation of such communities will first and foremost be a product of individual interest. As stated earlier by Rheingold (1993), virtual communities simply consist of individuals clustering together around a shared topic of interest on the Internet. Considering that some Let's Players have millions of followers compared to others whose followers can be counted in a single cipher, combined with the knowledge that gamers are a highly nuanced media audience, individual preferences can be assumed to play a vital part in predicting whether or not a Let's Play community will be successful.

Individual differences among gamers is a complicated field of study largely balancing between two distinct viewpoints; those who have found that videogames are bad for psychological development and those who have found the opposite. Examples of negative effects of playing videogames are occasional addictive gaming tendencies (Hartmann, Jung & Vorderer, 2012) as well as increased levels of aggravation and mean feelings while playing violent videogames (Greitemeyer & Osswald, 2010; Saleem, Anderson & Gentile, 2012). Some videogames also include violent content, but place it in a humoristic or satirical sphere (Karlsen, 2001). On the other hand, playing certain games has been shown to improve overall mood and contribute to lowering stress levels (Russionello et al., 2009) as well as generating increased prosocial thoughts (Greitemeyer & Osswald, 2010). However, some of the games used in the abovementioned studies were older single-player games, such as *Lemmings* (Greitemeyer & Osswald, 2010) and *Carmageddon 2* (Karlsen, 2001). During the time they were released, the only way to socialize through these games was to play them together with friends in the same geographical location. Today, both *Lemmings* and *Carmageddon 2* have been the subjects of Let's Plays, and a search for "Let's Play Lemmings" and "Let's Play Carmageddon 2" on YouTube yields 24,200 and 49,800 hits respectively as of April 25th, 2014. Let's Plays, therefore, can contribute to renewed interest in older games in addition to adding a social dimension to single-player games that was far from possible when the games were initially released to the public.

3 Method and Procedure

3.1 Participants and recruitment

The empirical data which formed the foundation of this monograph was gathered from nine participants through the use of an online interview survey with open-ended questions developed by the researcher. A total of 21 people were asked to participate in the study, but as initially predicted the majority did not reply while others dropped out along the course of the project. One informant encountered computer problems, and it is probable that the involvement of Google+ in YouTube's messaging system also contributed to the lack of replies. All nine informants were connected to the Let's Play phenomenon, although their experience with Let's Plays varied.

Keeping with Mortensen's (2009) and Yee's (2014) findings that gamers are a diverse and assorted crowd, the informants were selected to represent a wide range of sociocultural backgrounds, ages and genders. The sample consisted of two females and six males, while one informant did not want to specify gender. They were all in the age range of 18-28 years, and lived in different countries. It is important to note that the informants also differed in what degree they were connected to the Let's Play phenomenon. While the majority (five informants) described themselves as merely watching Let's Plays, two informants made Let's Plays regularly and two other informants were game developers. One of the Let's Players described himself as the leader of a self-established Let's Play community. The differing connections to the Let's Play phenomenon was intended to reveal if themes remained consistent across professions, or if Let's Plays are perceived differently by people who watch them compared to those who make them.

Recruitment of the informants happened in a variety of ways across a series of websites. Four informants were recruited from art forums where the researcher had previously established an account. One informant was contacted through personal contact information provided on his personal Let's Play-dedicated website. Two informants were made accessible through the use of snowball sampling, while the remaining two were contacted through Facebook's messaging system and Skype. YouTube's internal messaging system was also used, but the only respondents eventually cut contact for unknown reasons. When they were initially contacted, the informants were given two short documents containing participant information and -rights (**appendix A**) in addition to the interview questions (**appendix B**). These documents were also included when the project was sent to the NSD for approval.

The project was acknowledged as satisfactory according to existing ethical guidelines (**appendix C**). If the informants chose to participate, they were also entered into a random number-generated lottery where they could win one out of two prizes; 45 and 20 euros worth of game-related downloads from the Steam platform.

3.2 Material

3.2.1 Interview survey

After agreeing to participate and having been informed about their rights, the informants were given the opportunity to choose how they wanted to be interviewed. The original intention was to conduct a series of oral interviews through the use of Skype and the *PowerGramo* online recording utility, but this idea was scrapped due to several factors. First of all, due to the large variety of geographical locations of the informants, time zones had to be considered and made it difficult to find a proper time for an interview to happen. Secondly, the informants had other matters to attend to outside of Internet usage. This made an already existing time constraint on the researcher's part even more pressing. Furthermore, the majority of the informants wanted to answer the questions on their own leisure, and therefore asked if they could have a text-based version of the interview questions. In the end, only one interview was conducted orally due to the close geographical location of the informant. This interview was recorded with an Olympus voice recorder, and transcribed by the researcher. Participant information was provided face-to-face at the beginning of this interview, and due to the informant's limited experience with Let's Plays several questions had to be omitted.

The interview questions were designed to encompass a wide variety of aspects based on the researcher's previous experience with the Let's Play phenomenon. It can be described as a qualitative interview in survey form, and contained a total of 17 questions (**appendix B**). The informants were urged to answer as detailed as possible, and to skip any questions that they felt uncomfortable answering or that did not apply to them personally. The questions were phrased in a way that would make it easy for the informant to provide information which he or she would find relevant. Additionally, the final question allowed the informants to include any information they could think of that the survey had not covered up until that point. To avoid misunderstandings related to the questions, the researcher provided an e-mail address where the informants could ask questions pertaining to the interview survey. The informants were also urged to send their finished surveys to this e-mail, although some eventually were sent through Skype.

3.2.2 *Websites and literature*

In order to conduct the final analysis, several Let's Play-related websites (YouTube, Twitch, The Let's Play Archive, Reddit, Facebook and personal Let's Play websites) were visited and the content of these websites were compared to the stories provided by the nine informants. This was done in order to validate the information provided, and to be able to relate this information to the themes that were revealed. Some of these websites, such as YouTube and the Let's Play Archive, had also been frequented by the researcher for an extended period of time before the project was initialized. The entire collection of websites chosen for this analysis constitutes the *data corpus* (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The personal stories of the informants compose the *data set* (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Some of the literature provided in section 2 of this monograph was gathered and prepared before the interviews were conducted, and has to some extent affected the course of the project. It was initially assumed, based on observations made by the researcher over an extended period of time, that Let's Plays would be arranged as several small virtual communities across the Internet, and that the Let's Play phenomenon would involve a social and technological dimension. Relevant literature within these fields was therefore collected, and compared to the informants' personal stories once they were given. Literature that was considered to be irrelevant to the emerging themes was excluded from the final analysis. Major themes that were not initially covered by the existing literature were later provided with a second literature search in order to be included in the monograph.

While there is no clear and straightforward step-by-step guide to conducting a thematic analysis, this monograph was written in accordance with guidelines for good qualitative research (Elliott, Fischer & Rennie, 1999; Meyrick, 2006). In addition to reporting the project to the NSD, attempts were also made to adhere to suggested ethical guidelines for Internet research (Ess & committee, 2002).

3.3 Design

The method of analysis chosen for this project was deductive thematic analysis, inspired by Aronson (1994), Braun and Clarke (2006) and Lambert and O'Halloran (2008). The reason for choosing thematic analysis is multifaceted. First of all, the researcher is new to qualitative research, and thematic analysis has been shown to be a good introduction to qualitative psychological research due to its simple structure (Howitt, 2010). Braun and Clarke (2006)

mention that thematic analysis is the very first qualitative method of analysis that researchers should be familiarized with. Langdrige (2004) also points out that the coding process that is present in many qualitative analyses makes it easy to see emerging patterns in the collected data, which in turn makes it easier to establish the emergence of central themes for further analysis. Additionally, thematic analysis is flexible in regard to how the researcher wishes to approach the study at hand (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This makes the study of undiscovered or non-researched fields, such as Let's Plays, more accessible. Adding to this, Lambert and O'Halloran (2008) write that thematic analysis allows for the identification and analysis of recurring themes in a data set, which makes for a handy tool when analyzing previously unknown subjects.

3.4 Procedure

Drawing inspiration from Aronson (1994), Braun and Clarke (2006) as well as Lambert and O'Halloran (2008), a thematic analysis was conducted over the course of five stages. The data material used for the analysis was gathered from nine informants with variable degrees of experience with, and different connections to, the Let's Play phenomenon. The information provided was, as mentioned above, compared to the researcher's previous experience with various Let's Play communities on the Internet to ensure additional validity of the responses. Central, recurring themes and their respective subcategories were drawn out for analysis.

3.4.1 Stage 1 – Data familiarization

After receiving the completed interview surveys from the informants, the researcher read and re-read the collected material until familiarization with the data was considered satisfactory. The data were then copied into a *coding scheme* in Microsoft Word, which consisted of three columns. One column contained the interview questions, one contained the informant's personal answers and the third column was reserved for initial coding. An example of this coding scheme can be found in the Appendix section (**appendix D**). The researcher treated each data extract as a valid source of information during this stage, to avoid losing potentially valuable analytical information.

3.4.2 Stage 2 – Initial coding stage

Utilizing Braun and Clarke's (2006) suggested approach, a set of basic codes were produced from individual data extracts contained within the transcribed interviews. The coding was done in Microsoft Word, and was based on color schemes. Each separate color

would indicate a connection shared by the individual data extracts, which was intended to make the later categorization of themes easier for the researcher (**appendix D**). Although Microsoft Word operates on a limited color palette, the researcher made sure to choose colors which differed enough to avoid confusing one color with the other. Data extracts that did not match up against a specific category were coded in black, and were continuously considered for later categorization. Again, no data was omitted due to potentially vital information loss.

3.4.3 *Stage 3 – Turning codes into themes*

Once all nine interviews were color coded, the process of categorizing each individual data extract into the broader categories of themes began. Browsing through each coding scheme, data extracts with the same color codes were clustered together to check the frequency of data occurrence. If individual codes were considered to be indicative of an overarching theme, they would be included for the final analysis. It is important to note that due to the relative newness of the Let's Play phenomenon, the researcher prioritized the inclusion rather than the exclusion of central themes. This means that certain themes have far higher amounts of subthemes than others, but are still considered to be important contributors to the wholeness of the Let's Play phenomenon. For instance, the theme "*Social Factors*" contains a total of seven subthemes while "*Media Content*" only contains two. The themes are however, despite their size difference, considered to be of equal importance.

3.4.4 *Stage 4 – Theme refinement*

During this stage, the established themes were considered for inclusion or exclusion from further interpretation and analysis. Some themes were also considered for merging. For example, the theme of "*The Game*" was finally included under the much more encompassing theme "*Role of Technology*". A leftover miscellaneous theme called "*Personal / Unique Factors*" from stage 2 had its subthemes categorized under more fitting themes, such as "*Social Factors*" and "*Role of Technology*" (**appendix E**). Individual data which occurred so rarely that they did not fit into either of the existing themes or subthemes were reconsidered for inclusion, but eventually removed from further analysis due to their scarcity.

3.4.5 *Stage 5 – Theme naming and definition*

For the final stage before the report itself, each theme was given an appropriate name and listed together with its subthemes. Each main theme was described in brief detail before the subthemes were presented with illustrative quotes from the nine informants. This was

done with inspiration from Lambert and O'Halloran (2008). The findings emerging from each theme were compared to previously retrieved literature, and new sources were frequented for subthemes that the existing literature did not cover. The researcher then subjected each subtheme for analysis and personal interpretation, which can be found in section 4 – Results and Discussion.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Due to the circumstances of the research, informants had to be recruited via the Internet. This is a complicated ethical minefield, especially considering that the guidelines from the American Psychological Association for Internet research are under continuous development. One of the main problems encountered in the study was the ability to distinguish publically accessible information from private information. An important question for the researcher while gathering information about the Let's Play phenomenon was "Can certain individuals be quoted without giving their permission first?" While this may seem unproblematic, several YouTube accounts did not respond to the request for informants, probably due to their large amount of subscribers and therefore huge amounts of incoming e-mails, suggestions for future Let's Plays, video comments et cetera.

In the introduction to this monograph, three YouTube accounts are specifically mentioned due to benefitting from such large audiences of followers and subscribers. These accounts are available to the public, and some are also monetized which means that added attention means higher profit. According to a set of ethical guideline suggestions for Internet research provided by Charles Ess and the Association of Internet Researchers (2002), media content intended as "a public act or performance that invites recognition for accomplishment" is subject to "less obligation to protect individual privacy" (p. 7). Additionally, the three accounts mentioned are retrieved from a publically accessible archive of Internet statistics known as Statsheep. The information also does not contain any sensitive material.

To protect the participants in the project in accordance to other ethical guidelines (Elliott et al., 1999; Meltzoff, 1998), all nine respondents have been anonymized and informed that the project has been reported to the NSD. The participant information as well as the interview questions have been approved by this same committee (**appendix C**). Any information provided by the informants will be deleted once the project is over. The informants were also given the opportunity to validate the information they had provided through respondent validation, if they wished to do this.

4 Results and Discussion

A thematic analysis inspired by Aronson (1994), Braun and Clarke (2006) and Lambert and O'Halloran (2008) was conducted to analyze the content and emerging themes resulting from nine qualitative interviews about the Let's Play phenomenon. After considering the possibility of merging similar themes together as well as checking for the frequency of each recurring data extract, a total of five main themes with a range of two to seven subthemes were identified and brought out for further analysis from the data set. Each theme will be discussed in detail and connected to excerpts from the interviews as well as previous research from section 2 of the monograph, followed by a general discussion where the application and future development of the Let's Play phenomenon will be considered. The informants are referred to by numbers in order to protect their anonymity. A complete list of the themes and their respective subthemes can be found in the Appendix (**appendix F**).

4.1 Media Content

Media content in this monograph is considered to be the interaction between the Let's Players and their audience in the form of the Let's Play videos themselves. The videos, produced by the Let's Players, are distributed and promoted through a variety of media sharing websites to a wide audience of media users. The media content will generally produce some kind of reaction among the viewers, which in turn will determine the quality and character of the feedback the Let's Player might receive.

4.1.1 – Need for media content

Two: *“I was looking for some tips for some redstone stuff in minecraft actually. After searching youtube for a couple of minutes I did find a let'splay by a person who called himself Ethoslab Minecraft [sic] done technical. After watching a few of his videos I was in some way hooked.”*

Eight: *“I stream games because it's incredibly fun to share a gaming experience with an audience. It also allows me to add flavor to these games with appropriate commentary.”*

Maslow (1943/2000) suggested that human motivation to perform certain actions was controlled by internal needs that required satisfaction. The majority of the informants replied that they often looked up game-related videos on the Internet for various purposes, ranging

from wanting to see how the game plays, hear interesting trivia and even examine technical details about the game that are not readily available for everyone. As mentioned earlier, this shared curiosity towards a specific subject of interest on the Internet is a large contributor towards the establishment of a virtual community (Kannan et al., 2000; Rheingold, 1993; Spaulding, 2010) as well as the perceived sense of belonging to such a virtual community (Blanchard & Markus, 2002; Chiu et al., 2006; de Valck et al., 2009; Dholakia et al., 2004; Tonteri et al., 2011). Based on the stories provided by the two informants above, it is clear that there is some connection between what Let's Players want to achieve by posting videogame-related videos and the intentions of the people viewing these videos. *Eight* makes Let's Plays because he thinks it *provides* his viewers and fans with a positive experience, while *Two* watches Let's Plays because he *wants* this positive experience. It is also worth mentioning that *Two* originally just wanted specific details related to the redstone material in *Minecraft*, a material which is hard to use without instructions, but ended up watching several more videos despite his original need being satisfied. The Let's Play experience could therefore possibly provide something beyond just practical or technical game specifications.

4.1.2 – Need for entertaining content

One: *“I watch lets plays almost every day. I associate it with people who enjoy sports and also enjoy watching sports on tv.”*

Four: *“In my eyes, Let's Play videos are nothing more than a source of entertainment and information regarding the quality of the games. They are fun (depending on the commentator) and give a direct insight into actual gameplay instead of reading someone's thoughts about a game.”*

Previously mentioned research suggests that an individual will process information more thoroughly when they consider the subject to be relevant to their own goals and interests (Bartsch & Oliver, 2011). Let's Plays also seem to fit under this assumption. When a person has a need or drive towards examining specific media content, they will benefit more from the information provided supposing that they are deeply involved in the subject from before. When compared to text-based videogame material such as walkthroughs (Mortensen, 2009) and text-based reviews found in some videogame magazines, Let's Plays offer a much wider and arguably more entertaining scope on each given game. For example, informant *Four* states that he considers Let's Plays to be a generally entertaining phenomenon that simultaneously provides a more wholesome picture of how the game plays, making Let's

Plays a subcategory of edutainment (Sorathia & Servidio, 2012). When magazines were the dominant force of the videogame review market, gamers were only given a couple of paragraphs of text and maybe a few screenshots in order to determine for themselves whether or not a game was worth buying. Let's Plays, on the other hand, provide insightful and often unbiased commentary about how the game controls and looks, while the viewer simultaneously gets to see how the controls and graphics work on-screen. The result is something akin to that of a television series, which informant *One* points out. It is also not intrusive like commercials or ads which usually appear in other online media content, since the viewer generally has to willingly search for a Let's Play in order to watch it.

4.2 Social Factors

One of the most exciting features of the Let's Play phenomenon is the inclusion of a new social dimension to videogames. While online gaming with others is nothing new, Let's Plays include a form of parasocial interaction comparable with playing games with a friend in your own home, although the only way to affect gameplay would be to actively post comments on the video telling the Let's Player what to do next. The result is that Let's Plays sometimes become a team effort, where the end result depends on the amount of feedback the Let's Player receives from the viewers in-between making and editing videos.

4.2.1 – Social networking

Six: (When asked about if he feels his subscribers have become part of his community) *“Well, all one of them did. He’s been my best bud for a few years, and he was the only guy to watch them.”*

Eight: *“I’ve met a few other youtubers and streamers. Considering I own my very own stream, I have a number of other streamers under me. I’ve met most of them at some point. On a side note, it’s always a thrill to be a guest on someone elses stream.”*

It is generally confirmed that humans are social animals. Supposing this is indeed factual, there is every reason to believe that if humans have social needs as well as a connection to people from all over the world via the Internet, they are bound to experience some sort of gratification when they access this connection (Weiser, 2001). However, sociability has become a term with flexible boundaries since the introduction of the Internet, especially since the inclusion of social media sites where direct communication with anyone

has been made possible. While much of this communication is one-way and goes unreciprocated in what is known as parasocial interaction (Stever, 2009), Let's Players have been known to form real-life relationships with other gamers. *Eight* also explains that Let's Players establish social networks with each other where they co-host Livestreams and other online events. *Eight* is also the leader of a team of Let's Players, and considers the combined efforts of his fellow Let's Players and the viewers of his stream to form a community. *Six* has a smaller social network than *Eight*, but describes his close friendship with the subscriber he has. This suggests that the size of a Let's Play community is not necessarily what matters in the long run, but rather the strong social ties between the individual members and the shared interest they have for videogames. The latter finding lends support to the theory that you do not have to be actively participating in virtual communities in order to actually be a part of them (de Valck et al., 2009; Tonteri et al., 2011); what matters most is that you personally enjoy the content that is presented to you within the boundaries of the community.

4.2.2 – Partaking in a virtual community

Four: *“I see myself as a mere and humble anonymity. I don't interact with the Let's Players in any form, I don't even hit “Like” on their videos.”*

Seven: (When asked if she feels like part of a Let's Play community) *“I'm a lurker; I watch a lot of Let's Plays but scarcely leave comments. (...) I cannot say that I do, if not only because I don't actively participate in it. I'm only watching the videos.”*

Eight: *“Many of my youtube subscribers have found my streaming website and joined the community. It's what makes my stream consistently interesting.”*

One of the more surprising findings in the study was the differing degrees of sense of virtual community. While the Let's Players themselves seem to think of their community as solid and tightly-knit, the viewers are more hesitant to describe themselves as part of a community. However, this may also boil down to something as simple as a problem of definition. Based on the comments by *Seven* and *Four*, they apparently consider virtual communities to be arenas where actual interaction, like posting comments or hitting the “Like”-button on certain videos, takes place between the Let's Player and his or her viewers. However, as mentioned earlier one doesn't need

to be an active participant in order to be considered part of a community (de Valck et al., 2009; Hargittai & Walejko, 2008; Tonteri et al., 2011). *Seven* even describes herself as a lurker, meaning a person who makes use of media content without leaving any visible feedback. Lurkers and active posters have both been included as worthy components of a functional virtual community (Blanchard & Markus, 2002). This finding suggests that Let's Play communities can actually be far bigger than what they initially appear due to large numbers of nonresponsive members.

4.2.3 – *Hearing someone's voice*

Five: *“Before I met my main group of friends I was a typical loner, so Let's Plays served a similar purpose as podcasts, just a voice to listen to and feel like someone's there. Sounds pretty grim!”*

Nine: *“If I like the person's voice, that's very important.”*

In their study on immersion in games, Cairns and colleagues (2013) discovered that the geographical location of the player's opponent did not matter as long as the opponent was a human instead of a computer. Weibel and colleagues (2008) also found that a player would become more emotionally invested in a game if their opponent was human. Social presence therefore seems to be a strong component in modern-day videogames, from listening to the other player's voice and knowing that someone is *there*. While playing games alone can still be considered enjoyable, social gaming is becoming increasingly more popular. Videogame developers are well aware of this; in 2013, the long-awaited videogame *BioShock: Infinite* from developer *Irrational Games* was delayed partly due to the attempt to include a multiplayer component. While the project was scrapped and the game was released to the public without a multiplayer component to rave reviews, the exclusion of the multiplayer was not well-received by one of *Irrational Games*' co-founders (Cai, 2012). While Let's Plays are somewhat on the edge between playing a game and watching someone else play the game for you, they can potentially provide important new social aspects to the gradually developing social gaming industry. One informant even describes watching a Let's Play as “watching a buddy who won't hand you the controller”. Watching a Let's Play is therefore comparable to the kind of gaming that many experienced as children; in front of the television with friends at home.

4.2.4 – *Let's Play meet-ups*

Two: (When asked about socializing with other Let's Players) *"Well yes, I have a friend who livestreams CS:GO (Counter-Strike: Global Offensive)"*.

Five: (When asked the same question as *Two*) *"Nope, but my partner was a friend of NintendoCapriSun and RedYoshi (Famous Let's Players)! And another friend of mine met her Let's Play friends at PAX (Penny Arcade Expo, a videogame festival), which was really cool to see."*

Six: (When asked the same question as *Two*) *"I did once, and he was really cool. I hope to meet him at RTX (Rooster Teeth Expo, a gaming and Internet convention) in July, and just chill with him because he's a nice guy."*

Eight: *"I've met a few other youtubers and streamers. Considering I own my very own stream, I have a number of other streamers under me. I've met most of them at some point. On a side note, it's always a thrill to be a guest on someone else's stream."*

Going back to Yee's (2014) research on gamers, it was found that a large percentage of his informants had normal everyday lives outside of gaming, complete with strong social relations and jobs. Mortensen (2009) also points out that social relations tend to be strengthened by common interests, which in this case is videogames. The informants in this study seem to have a good balance between socializing via established computer networks in addition to meeting up with people in real life. While *Two* and *Six* have limited experience with Let's Play meet-ups, they still consider the experience as largely positive. *Six* even hopes that his connection with another Let's Player will contribute to positive future events. Informant *Five*, a game developer, mentions knowing someone with contacts within the Let's Play phenomenon, highlighting the importance of solid social networks within the videogame industry. *Eight's* answer from the social networking section (4.2.1) is also included here, because he has considerable experience with such meet-ups, and finds great pleasure in participating in these events. This goes to show that gamers not only benefit from the contacts they have online; they are also fully capable of meeting up and sharing their interests with others in real life, thus lending support to van Dijk's (1997) proposal that virtual communities are capable of strengthening existing real-life social ties.

4.2.5 – Depression relief

Six: (When asked if he has any funny or interesting personal stories about Let's Plays) *"They actually brought me out of my depression. I was watching these six idiots, grown men, no less, run about in Minecraft not knowing how to do anything, It made me laugh, and gave me incentive to get a degree that would let me work at their company."*

Eight: *"In some cases, I've had people tell me that I helped them overcome depression with my streaming/funny commentary. There's almost nothing more rewarding than doing what you love and knowing there are people who love what you are doing."*

Depression is a common way of describing events that make us feel sad, general fatigue or unhappy thoughts (Comer, 2010). In some cases, sufferers may also experience reduced self-confidence and concentration, sleep disorders, reduced appetite and worry for the future (World Health Organization, 2000). Although depression is often a term used for a much milder state of mind than the actual clinical ailment, it is clear that feeling sad and unhappy is never a good thing in the long run. *Six* and *Eight* describe two separate situations within their respective Let's Play communities where they experienced the effects of entertaining media content on depression; *Six* reports becoming happier after watching a Let's Play, and *Eight* reports that making a funny Let's Play made people happier. Considering that previous research has shown that positive feedback to any given action will likely increase the frequency of said action (Ryan & Deci, 2000), Let's Plays can in some cases relieve depressive symptoms. Knowing that his Let's Plays make people happier, *Eight* is also predictably more likely to generate and upload more content because he finds this to be important and gratifying (Park et al., 2011).

4.3 Commercial Factors

Let's Plays offer a new and interesting perspective on videogame advertising. While online advertisements and commercials are sometimes intrusive, and even interrupt media content such as uploaded videos and Livestreams, Let's Plays need to be sought out in order to have a commercial purpose. Also, compared to text-based videogame information such as reviews in magazines and walkthroughs, Let's Plays offer a wider scope of how the game

LET'S GRADUATE - THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF LET'S PLAYS

sounds, feels and looks. A motivation to search for Let's Plays suggests that people have a need to watch them, and the reasons they have to do so will be examined below.

4.3.1 – Monetized Let's Plays

Five: (Talking about Let's Players being paid to play games) *"I know the Grumps (Game Grumps, popular Let's Play duo) did it once and people got mad, so Lpers being payed [sic] is a thing that definitely could get complicated."*

Six: (When asked what introduced him to Let's Plays) *"I watched a lot of Achievement Hunter by Roosterteeth (popular YouTube channel known for making machinima and Let's Plays), which made me think "These untrained idiots are sitting in front of a screen making money playing video games. Why can't I do that?" So I did it."*

Eight: *"Many Let's Players make money from their videos/streams. This adds extra incentive for them to do a good job. Youtube and various networks associated with youtube can monetize videos with ads. This, in my opinion, creates a healthy environment for Let's Players and allows them to focus more on production value since they have more money and time to create videos. At the moment there is some controversy regarding youtube eliminating some of the money Let's Players make, which is like youtube shooting themselves in the foot. I hope the market for Let's Plays continues to thrive and everyone remains happy, content creators and viewers alike."*

Perhaps one of the biggest controversies with the Let's Play phenomenon is the monetization of Let's Plays, or paying Let's Players to play games. The YouTube Partnership Program (2014) allows YouTube to insert advertisements into the videos the Let's Players upload, and the Let's Players benefit financially from the ad revenue they receive from people watching their videos. There is a tendency for creative work to be formed around two separate camps; those who do creative work simply because they enjoy doing it and those who wish to earn financial benefits from doing it. *Five* describes an incident where a popular Let's Play duo monetized one of their videos, causing their viewers to become upset. *Six* and *Eight* consider the benefits of monetized Let's Plays in a more positive light. *Six* thinks of monetized Let's Plays as something anyone can do, and therefore decided to give it a go

himself. *Eight* mentions that monetized Let's Plays can increase the quality of future Let's Plays due to ad revenue being used to get better recording equipment. He also points out the cutbacks that YouTube has made into financing Let's Plays due to a copyright debate about what is considered to be eligible for inclusion in an uploaded video, especially in regard to music and soundtracks. Further research into audience attitudes towards monetized Let's Plays is warranted in order to reach a firm conclusion about what would be the best solution for the future of this aspect of the Let's Play phenomenon.

4.3.2 – *Let's Plays as detailed game reviews*

One: “(...) *it (the Let's Play phenomenon) encourages new game developers to design more games, especially with lets players offering their opinions and critiques.*”

Three: “(...) *when a Let's Play has an interesting premise (solid humor/commentary, interesting critique of the games or simply solid walkthroughs/speedruns (playing through the game as fast as possible)), it can be highly enjoyable and/or entertaining to watch.*”

Four: “*Initially I watched Let's Plays in order to determine if a game was interesting enough for purchase reasons. I usually don't trust reviews etc. in magazines since people have different preferences regarding games, meaning a reviewer could experience a game quite differently than me personally.*”

Five: “(...) *shifting LP content towards the indie scene is helping fuel that creativity and passion (as a game creator) even more.*”

Aside from being entertaining and to a certain degree sociable, Let's Plays can also be used for purely informative reasons. Video-based Let's Plays make it easy for the viewers to see for themselves how the game flows, how the controls work and other aesthetic, visual features of the game. Additionally, the Let's Player will offer his or her opinions as the game proceeds. *Four* points out that this is never possible in text-based reviews, often due to the subjective opinion of the reviewer. It was often the case in the 90's Norwegian *Nintendo Power* magazines that reviewers would have favorite game genres, which would sometimes affect the final score they gave the game being tested. The introduction of video software to the public therefore drastically affected the way items are reviewed, as well as the quality of

said reviews. *One* and *Five* mention indie games, or games made and published by independent developers and the importance that Let's Plays may have for them. It is no secret that Let's Plays have contributed to the increased popularity of certain games. For instance, the indie game *Thomas Was Alone* sold eight times more units than its initial launch day due to a Let's Player doing a review of it (McFerran, 2013).

4.3.3 – Let's Plays as purchase portals

Three: (When asked about Let's Players including download links to the game being played in their video descriptions) *"As long as they include the game's title anyone informed enough to watch the video should be able to find out more about it, unless it's an obscure retro game you can't buy anymore."*

Four: (When asked the same question as *Three*) *"I see no reason why they should not. This only makes it easier to try out the games if they seem entertaining enough."*

Five: *"Download links should always be a thing if it's freeware or purchasable online."*

Six: (When asked the same question as *Three*) *"I have done it before and I have never been steered wrong."*

Eight: (When asked the same question as *Three*) *"This is a fantastic idea. If it helps the developer, it helps the Let's Play community."*

Nine: *"I usually watch a walkthrough or... first five minutes of the game before I buy it. After Internet came I've begun doing it. It's of purely practical reasons, to see if the game is good or not."*

Some Let's Players include direct links to online stores and archives such as Steam or Amazon where a viewer can purchase the game being Let's Played. These download links are normally either included in the "About"-section of the video, or embedded in the video frame as an annotation. The general idea behind this is to include the viewer in the gaming experience as well as contributing to added sales and attention. Considering the predicted growth rate of the videogame industry in the next couple of years (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2013) as well as the increase in Internet accessibility (Rainie & Wellman, 2012), it could be

interesting to see if added attention to the Let's Play phenomenon could have an impact on these statistics. Also, for Let's Players specializing in casual and peaceful games, the inclusion of download links could be used to promote games that have been shown to have certain health benefits (Greitemeyer & Osswald, 2010; Russionello et al., 2009).

4.3.4 – *Discovering new games through Let's Plays*

One: (When asked about her general opinion of the Let's Play phenomenon)

“Great! I think it opens doors to new indie games I would have never discovered (...)”

Six: *Let's Plays are more about experiencing a game that you don't own or on a console you can't afford.”*

Eight: (When asked why he watches Let's Plays or Livestreams) *“(...) for the purposes of discovering new games and maybe discovering things about older games I'd never seen before.”*

Going back to Bartle's (1996, 2014) four player types, it is clear that discovering new games as well as new aspects of older games is of considerable importance to some gamers, mainly the Explorers. Some YouTube accounts are even dedicated to uncovering and exposing in-game elements that were left out before the games were released to the public. Knowing that gamers are an adventurous crowd, certain games like the later additions to the *FallOut* series, *World of Warcraft* and the *Baldur's Gate* series were designed in such a way that there would always be new items, enemies and quests available for the player to find. Some games also include different pathways to the same goal, and the player can often choose if they want a direct or stealthy approach in order to complete their mission. However, before discovering in-game content the players need information about the general aspects of the game itself. Let's Players often highlight games that are outside the mainstream, ensuring that products from independent developers also get a chance in the spotlight. As *One* points out, Let's Players and independent game developers form a synergy where they help each other to establish a foothold within their respective fields of gaming; the developer makes the game for the Let's Player to review, and the Let's Player gives his or her opinion about the product to their audience. The end result is that the Let's Player's audience gets the information they need about the game. The developer and the Let's Player get attention from the audience and

maybe even dedicated fans and followers, which in turn might contribute to future collaborations between the two.

4.4 Role of Technology

Mortensen (2009) writes that the main difference between a digital game and any other kind of game is the technological requirements in order to play them. Indeed, all videogames from something as simple as old wristwatch games to modern-day computer games have the technology requirement in common, mainly in the form of a platform or console where they can be played. While the majority of videogames are based on the principle of plug-and-play, some games are too outdated to play or have simply vanished off the market. Other games are so rare or obscure that they are usually only found on Internet auctions, and usually demand very high prices. Navigating Internet auctions or the Internet in general requires some basic technological skill as well. The role of technological knowledge and issues in relation to Let's Plays will be discussed here.

4.4.1 – Inability to play due to technological limitations

Two: (When asked why he watches Let's Plays or Livestreams) *“Well since I live in a camping wagon, I do not have much for entertainment. I got three channels on my TV, a bass guitar and a laptop with somewhat decent internet. So when I am not playing on my bass or watching the news on the TV I am watching let's plays of either Fallout 2, Minecraft, and some other random let's plays which I find entertaining.”*

Four: *“(…) as a poor-as-a-tit student, the economy shrouds the opportunity of investing into several games and consoles (…). It is considerably less time consuming as well to start a Let's Play video on a laptop, fast forward to skip boring parts and pause at will. Also, the fact that many games exists exclusively on certain game systems makes it hard to enjoy games on consoles which I do not possess.”*

Seven: (When asked what got her into Let's Plays) *“The inability to play some of my favorite games after I upgraded my computer. (…). Sometimes I will watch a Let's Play of a game that I'm unable to play myself.”*

LET'S GRADUATE - THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF LET'S PLAYS

As computer technology develops, older games become more difficult to play. Although websites such as GOG.com are intended to supply older games compatible with newer systems, they are not necessarily readily available to the public. Let's Plays of older games allow viewers to relive games from their childhoods and participate in a gaming experience they no longer have the technology to produce themselves. A powerful component in modern-day gaming is the emotion known as nostalgia, a "feeling of pleasure and sadness that is caused by remembering something from the past and wishing that you could experience it again" (Nostalgia, Merriam-Webster's online dictionary, n.d.) or a suffering or wanting to return to one's place of origin (Wildschut, Sedikides, Arndt & Routledge, 2006). Although it is difficult to conclude that watching a Let's Play alone will suffice in removing nostalgic emotions without further research, Let's Plays can direct the gamer to online stores and auctions where they can purchase the games for themselves.

4.4.2 – *Obscure or retro games*

Three: (Talking about whether or not to include download links in the video description) *"As long as they include the game's title anyone informed enough to watch the video should be able to find out more about it, unless it's an obscure retro game you can't buy anymore."*

Six: (Talking about Let's Plays providing a boost to sales on gaming platforms like Steam) *"The boost is welcome to all who work and may provide enough funding to allow indie developers to make more games or sequels."*

Eight: *"In some cases, people have even CREATED bad games specifically for me to stream. It's very odd. (...) I also like to play games that are bizarre, which makes for a more entertaining stream."*

Large quantities of the videogames produced and sold today are made by large-scale developers (Entertainment Software Association, 2012). However, indie developers are gradually making their way onto the market as well. These developers do not enjoy the benefits of previous commercial success like many of the bigger companies do, and are dependent on successful marketing and commercialization of their games. Other developers no longer exist due to bankruptcy, or they have been bought up by other gaming companies. As a result they often discontinue sales of specific games entirely, making them hard to find.

Let's Players can benefit independent developers by playing their games, often for free, to a media audience. *Three* even mentions that he prefers Let's Players to include download links only if the game is very difficult to locate. *Eight* has experienced having games made *for him specifically*, and frequently includes these in his Livestreams. Also, as mentioned in section 4.3.2, *Thomas Was Alone* experienced a large increase in attention and sales after a popular Let's Player played it, much like *Six* points out. In the case of retro games that are no longer available in stores, some Let's Players may still know where to obtain a copy and can thusly provide links to websites where the viewers can make their purchase. However, since the introduction of emulators which allows for free downloading and use of old games it is difficult to conclude if these download links have any effect. Further research on this field is therefore warranted.

4.4.3 – Technological knowledge

One: “*The amount of effort and time people put into making videos is really wonderful all around (...)*”

Three: “*I think Retsupurae is genius. Commentary on top of let's play commentary, often giving critique towards let's players that just provide low low quality gameplay footage/commentary.*”

Five: “*I also like when they have stuff to say regarding the art and design too. I want to learn from a LPer and also laugh of course.*”

Eight: “*In terms of videos, I put a lot of work into my video editing, which is something not a ton of Let's Players do. That's stuff that I feel goes a long way when choosing who's [sic] videos to watch.*”

Nine: (Talking about the importance of technological knowledge when making Let's Plays) “*Quality. Of the video. That matters. Sound. But again, it depends. Usually these people have often done it many times before, and it shows. They control the sound and the picture very well.*”

In order to create a high-quality Let's Play, a wide array of technological skills is required. As *One*, *Eight* and *Nine* point out, they are more inclined to watch a video where considerable visible effort has been put into it. *Three* mentions a YouTube channel dedicated to pointing out common flaws and mistakes that certain Let's Players make, suggesting that

superior technological knowledge is highly desirable on a much larger scale than the ramifications provided by this monograph. It is also worth considering that one of the owners of this YouTube account is Slowbeef, the first to upload a video-based Let's Play on the Internet (Slowbeef, 2013). Bartsch and Viehoff (2010) wrote that entertaining media generally provide the user with positive and thought-provoking experiences. It is possible that the lack of technological knowledge subtracts from the entertainment experience that Let's Plays are supposed to provide. The same thing can be said for almost any form of audiovisual media; if the picture quality or sound quality is low, the general experience is considered to be unpleasant or ungratifying. In order to ensure that technological elements such as video resolution or sound are acceptable, Let's Players need to possess detailed knowledge about computer software and –hardware, and how these different components interact.

4.4.4 – *Bad games vs. good games*

Four: *“I have no problem watching Let's Players play really bad games as long as the commentator indulge me in entertainment.”*

Eight: *“People send me bad games constantly to see my live reaction to them. It's almost as enjoyable to rip a bad game apart as it is to play a good one. In some cases, people have even CREATED bad games specifically for me to stream. It's very odd.”*

Baumeister and colleagues (2001) concluded that bad events are often perceived as having a larger impact than positive events. While the same isn't necessarily true for videogames, the distinction between bad and good games seems to matter less than the Let's Player's emotional response to the gameplay. In practice, this means that a game of comparatively low quality to other games can be considered an enjoyable experience if supplied with jokes and entertaining trivia that the Let's Player might possess about it. This serves to further highlight the assumption that Let's Plays are contributors to a new social gaming dimension in that, again, the player behind the controller becomes more important than what is going on in the game. However, this could also be a truth with modifications; while the informants agree that the Let's Player gradually becomes the most important part about deciding whether or not to watch a Let's Play, there are certain games that do not lend themselves well to being played for an audience. Some games rely heavily on repeating sequences (Coyne, 2003) and can quickly become unpleasant to watch or play due to sheer boredom. It is therefore important to note that a distinction between just plain bad games and

LET'S GRADUATE - THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF LET'S PLAYS

“so bad they’re good” games needs to be made in order to understand which bad games can compete with the good games in relation to entertainment value.

4.4.5 – *Specific game genres as niches*

Four: *“There exists a lot of channels on Youtube where gamers upload their videos, and we all have different preferences matching [sic] some of them. Some people like horror games, other like sport or driving games.”*

Six: *“As far as I can tell, a lot of Let’s Player’s follow each other and try and leech some success by playing the same games until they find their niche, such as Haydunn with Pokémon or Pewdiepie with horror games.”*

Mortensen (2009) provides a small list of existing videogame genres in her work, ranging from action games to “play and learn” games. While this list is a nice introduction, game genres are expanding quickly and new genres are making their way onto the market for developers to get into. One such new genre is “rogue-like”, where games are constantly changing and providing new maps and opponents every time the player restarts. Although many Let’s Players dabble in several different games, some have also chosen a niche in that they normally tend to play games that fit within one specific genre. By doing this, the Let’s Player’s audience and subscribers know what they are going to get when the Let’s Player releases a new video. It is comparable to specific stores selling specific brands; if a person wants a special brand of ice cream, he will know where to go because only a handful of stores provide this particular brand. Owning their niche also provides the Let’s Players with a tightly-knit community of interest, where commenters and fans can link the Let’s Player to new games to play and vice versa. This is an effective marketing strategy in that it builds a community of people with similar interests, and keeps this group of people entertained by supplying them with content they are deeply invested in.

4.4.6 – *Let’s Plays across websites*

One: *“More often I link certain videos to my friends through skype or facebook.”*

Six: *“I use all the mediums, including their (the Let’s Players) personal site, which I frequent at least twice a week. Youtube to watch, Twitter to talk to*

them, I can't find their Skype or Steam accounts, follow them on Facebook, and just watch them where they post the videos."

Eight: "I use Youtube primarily to upload highlights of my live stream. With that, Google+ is now the only way to comment, so I've unfortunately been roped into using that. We use Twitter to announce when we stream and Tumblr to post new videos or reblog fan-art. Skype is used for messaging and voice chatting while Steam is always a big part of how we play our games."

At the beginning of this project, it became clear that obtaining a sufficient amount of informants would be difficult. Let's Plays are widely dispersed across a range of websites, and it is complicated to get a good picture of where to start asking around for participants. Adding to the difficulty is the fact that Google+ was implemented in early 2014, removing the YouTube Inbox and making communication between YouTube accounts harder. On some websites, it is also challenging to discern between official and legitimate accounts and sockpuppet accounts owned by people other than the Let's Players themselves. Utilizing several websites does have its advantages, however. For instance, if one website gets subjected to a large-scale wipeout resulting in accounts getting deleted or content being removed, having a backup database will reduce the risk of losing uploaded material. It also allows for the continuous expansion of social networks in that the Let's Player gets added exposure from other audiences outside of their most preferred websites. *Eight* mentions a good example with the reblogging of fan-art through the popular media sharing site *Tumblr*. *Tumblr* is dedicated to the uploading and sharing of creative content, but also provides the opportunity of citing the original source of this content. As a result, if something piques a viewer's interest, he or she can easily trace it back to the original source. A piece of fan-art dedicated to *Eight* and his fellow Let's Players could therefore be traced to one of his videos through effective and thorough reblogging, and could result in several new fans and followers supposing the content is deemed interesting enough for future attention.

4.5 Role of the Let's Player

A central finding in this study is that there exists an important synergy between three separate elements in a Let's Play; the Let's Player, the game and the viewer. All three need to be present in order for a Let's Play to exist, and are considered to be of more or less equal importance. However, several of the informants agreed that while they initially began

watching Let's Plays because of game-related reasons, they often kept watching affiliated videos because of the Let's Player's personality and commentary. This section seeks to describe certain qualities about the Let's Player that the informants listed as determinants for whether or not they chose to keep watching his or her videos.

4.5.1 – Let's Player as comedian

One: "(...) Also certain lets players are entertaining to watch, either for their humorous comments or their general opinion of the game."

Four: "Often the commentators behind the videos say remarkably stupid and fantastically funny things, turning the video into a comedic act."

Six: "I know that it's difficult to be on point with humor, especially for a task-oriented gamer like myself. I'm also not very funny, and I did no promotion for it. I think they're (Let's Plays) fun and it's humorous when the Let's Player actually knows how to make what they're doing funny."

Let's Plays are known to be based around humorous or amusing content, and are often intended to make the viewer laugh and have a good time. Appreciating humorous content has been known to correlate positively with an individual's degree of extraversion (Moran, Rain, Page-Gould & Mar, 2014), and is associated with certain fun-based needs that people tend to possess (Ruch & Hehl, 1993). This ties together neatly with the established view of the Let's Player as a person who enjoys discovering and experiencing new things (games), and the previous discussion of the use of modern media as need fulfillment. Humor also serves as a link in what could be considered entertainment media and will therefore theoretically provide an increase in perceived positive experiences (Bartsch & Viehoff, 2010), which in turn forms the basis of why game developers choose to make games (Schell, 2008). Perceived positive experiences are more likely to be shared among friends and family (Dunn, Gilbert & Wilson, 2011; Gable et al., 2004; Kim & Phalak, 2012) and will therefore potentially spread out across social networks of similarly interested people. Some researchers also argue that the purchase of something that provides experiences instead of simply material goods is generally considered to be a better investment. This is thought to be because people have a greater difficulty fully adapting to experiences than to things and items. As a result, experiences are most often recognized as new and fresh due to their shifting and different natures, while material goods eventually lose these qualities after some time (Dunn et al., 2011).

4.5.2 – *Let's Player as critic*

One: (When asked about her thoughts regarding what makes for an interesting Let's Play) *“Good game that invokes reactions, commentary involving their personal opinions and humor.”*

Seven: (When asked the same question as *One*) *“I am biased, but I find LPs of horror games to be the most entertaining to watch. When it comes to the style of the video itself, I prefer if there's some form of insight present somewhere between all the screaming and nervous giggling.”*

Eight: *“It's almost as enjoyable to rip a bad game apart as it is to play a good one. (...) It's also good for the players as they get a fair and unbiased view of whether the game is good or not.”*

Let's Players have an important responsibility to their viewers when choosing whether or not to recommend the games they are playing. When an individual gets involved in a virtual community, they are bombarded with different opinions and advice that could affect their purchasing decisions (de Valck et al., 2009). The opinions expressed by the Let's Players about the games they play could potentially influence the viewers' buying interests, especially considering that there is often a connection between which games are popular to Let's Play and the “Top Sellers” list of games on Steam. As of March 23rd, 2014, several successful series of Let's Plays based on the top-selling Steam games are available for viewing on YouTube, such as *Payday 2*, *DayZ* and *South Park: The Stick of Truth*. While assuming a causal relationship is difficult, there is a chance that causality goes either way. Some may choose to play through the game by themselves before discovering a Let's Play of it, while others may want to watch a Let's Play before they make a purchase.

4.5.3 – *Let's Player as emotional*

Four: *“To me, the commentator has to keep an entertaining profile with bad jokes, create irrational connections to the real world and scream like a little girl from cheap jump scares.”*

Eight: *“Most of my videos are cut from live streams, so my reactions are all genuine and real. People know that when they watch my videos, I'm not embellishing.”*

LET'S GRADUATE - THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF LET'S PLAYS

Genuine emotional activation from the Let's Player seems to be a determinant of a good Let's Play. When playing games from a specific genre, viewers tend to expect emotional outbursts that coincide with the game being played such as screaming during horror games or laughing when faced with humorous or confusing in-game events. Emotions that seem to be staged or script-based are generally frowned upon, and will be discussed later in section 4.5.7. It is possible that individuals who view Let's Plays have a desire or need to confirm their own emotions about the specific game being played by watching others play and discuss it. Leon Festinger (1954) theorized that humans have a tendency to evaluate their own existing opinions and behaviors with those of others in what is known as *social comparison theory*. Putting this into perspective, viewing a Let's Play in order to see or read others' reactions to the game could provide a sense of belonging or group identity.

4.5.4 – Let's Player as reference person

Five: *“The Lper is like a character I have to keep up with! Because of this I only got into two, it was too much to keep track of. (...) To this day, whenever I'm playing RPGs with friends, I'm still all about shouting “GAAAAAME!”, “and they died”, and “secret passage!” (References to Let's Player catchphrases)”*

Eight: *“Considering I own my very own stream, I have a number of other streamers under me.”*

Virtual Let's Play communities tend to be formed around a “leader” character, usually in the shape of the Let's Player him-/herself. Considering that the Let's Player has a central position in the synergy of game-gamer-viewer, this is to be expected. Through their leadership and management of their own virtual communities, Let's Players often develop a foundation for referential humor and culture, such as through the catchphrases adopted by informant *Five*. Some Let's Play communities even name themselves after references made by the Let's Player, such as PewDiePie's *Bro Army*. Certain phrases and words repeated by the Let's Player in a playthrough can often be found in other series uploaded by the same Let's Player. One example of this is the phrase *“X, did you kill Rita?”*, a referential dialogue from the videogame *Darkseed 2* made popular by Retsupurae on YouTube, where the main character of the game is given the option of awkwardly asking other in-game characters if they murdered his supposed girlfriend. It is possible that such points of reference are used by the commenters to establish or reaffirm their connection with the Let's Player's community

through common social identity (Tonteri et al., 2011) or the creation of a common symbol system that experienced members can recognize (Blanchard & Markus, 2002).

4.5.5 – *Let's Player as a skilled gamer*

Two: *“The player have [sic] to be entertaining, somewhat good at the game, and just be him/herself.”*

Three: *“(…) have a clear premise behind why you Let's play: Is it a review-style video? Is it supposed to be funny? Why? Is the game bad? Is your voice weird? Maybe you're bad at playing games. (…) having large elements of the video just be the players themselves being horrible at gaming & missing queues is obnoxious.”*

Videogames are known to be spread out across a wide array of challenge ratings; some are easy to complete while others are not. The assessment of whether or not a game is difficult will depend on the player's previous experience with the same genre of games, their motivation to complete it and several other subjective variables. When choosing to view a Let's Play, several gamers tend to do so because they are stuck in a specific point of the game and want to move on. It is known that observing others succeed will lead to an increased faith in being able to perform comparable activities (Bandura, 1982). By analyzing what the Let's Player does, the player adapts their strategy thereafter and the challenge they are facing should eventually be overcome. However, if the Let's Player performs badly and is unable to overcome the challenge themselves, viewers could perceive the Let's Play as amateurish and low-quality. There seems to be a certain expectation for professionalism from the Let's Players, and that in-depth previous experience with the game is paramount.

4.5.6 – *Let's Player as Internet “celebrity”*

Six: (When asked for his thoughts about his fans and subscribers) *“I never really had any, so I don't have an answer. I'd probably have gotten a lot of hate and love because that's how people are. They'll love you for doing the work but hate you if you make a single mistake.”*

Seven: *“(…) the fan community's obsession with certain Let's Players tends to baffle me, as a portion of it tends to treat them like fictional characters*

LET'S GRADUATE - THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF LET'S PLAYS

rather than actual people, and their online persona becomes more attractive than the material they provide their audience with."

Eight: *"I don't often chat or do projects with other Let's Players, though many others have made videos or cartoons using my voice or video clips. It's extremely flattering to see people make their own videos using moments from my recorded life."*

Some Let's Players can be considered famous within the circle in which they operate. They sometimes have large audiences, fansites on social media websites, receive gifts and games from dedicated fans and arrange meet-ups where they mingle with other Let's Players and fans to play and socialize. Informants *Six*, *Seven* and *Eight* each have their own, separate experience with the fame and benefits that media attention tends to bring with it, but they share in common the view that Let's Players are comparable with modern-day celebrities in that they have a certain following. While nowhere near the intensity of the *Beatlemania* of the 1960's or the modern-day equivalent with Justin Bieber and his *Beliebers*, individual interest in the Let's Play phenomenon does vary some. Using Stever's (2009) levels of fan intensity (**appendix G**), most Let's Play subscribers would fit in the "Low Intensity" category of 4 or 5. The fan activity described by *Eight* would probably be placed on level 6 due to the amount of time spent making fan animations of the Let's Player's existing video material. This is commonly known as *machinima* (St. meld nr. 14, 2007-2008) and is a common product of interpersonal interest in celebrities.

4.5.7 – Let's Player as disturbance

Three: *"There's a lot of variations (of Let's Plays) I find rather uninteresting to watch or flat out unpleasant. (...) blurry shots, off-cam mess-ups & low-quality recorders ruin any LP."*

Seven: *"I find the fact that the most popular style of Let's Play involves a lot of incoherent screaming funny. (...) now I tend to avoid any material provided by certain Let's Players."*

Adhering to Buckingham and Scanlon's (2005) definition of edutainment, Let's Plays are supposed to be both entertaining and educational in nature. If they are neither, the result is often considered to be unpleasant or unbearable to the viewer, as evidenced by informants *Three* and *Seven*. A lack of the technological knowledge that is required for video editing and

recording mentioned in section 4.4.3 often contributes to such low-quality Let's Plays. However, there are also aspects of the Let's Player that need to be addressed in regard to the quality of a Let's Play. Lack of previous experience or knowledge about the game being Let's Played is considered a nuisance, since it adds little to the educational part of the edutainment dimension. This form of Let's Plays is commonly referred to as "blind", in that the Let's Player seldom knows the natural progression of the game and its storyline. *Seven* also mentions that some Let's Players rely too heavily on emotional activation to keep the viewer entertained, such as loud and exaggerated screaming during a horror game Let's Play. Theatrical reactions such as these go against the previously mentioned preference among the informants to view genuine emotions in a Let's Play. In sum, both the technological knowledge as well as the personal qualities possessed by the Let's Player are central determinants of how entertaining or educational the Let's Play will be.

4.6 Discussion of results

The purpose of this monograph was to give a brief introduction into the world of Let's Plays, as well as to further the understanding of why people feel motivated to contribute to this growing media phenomenon. A total of five main themes were uncovered: media content, social factors, commercial factors, role of technology and role of the Let's Player. The themes were subsequently analyzed by the researcher using existing literature from several fields of psychology, videogame theory, social networking and online communication.

The findings suggest that there is an overall tendency for the informants to regard the Let's Play phenomenon as a positive contribution to the future of videogames. However, there were some differences in how and why the informants made use of Let's Plays; while some chose to watch them simply due to the entertaining commentary and humoristic remarks made by the Let's Players, others were more interested in hearing about technological and artistic aspects of the games being played. These differences in media usage probably occurred due to the informants' varied professions; informants who only played games for entertainment purposes also had a tendency to watch Let's Plays because they were perceived as being entertaining, while the informants involved in game development were more interested in detailed critique as well as informational insight into game mechanics and game design. Informants with an above-average interest in videogames were also more likely to adopt qualities from both motivational dimensions in that they wanted both entertaining content as well as understanding how the games work, look and play.

LET'S GRADUATE - THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF LET'S PLAYS

While Let's Play fans and viewers were motivated largely by the material they were provided with, the Let's Players themselves had different reasons for partaking in the phenomenon. They wanted to establish social networks and communities focused largely around a subject they thought of as interesting and immersive, and also reported the following recognition and attention from their followers as positive experiences. To encompass this, Let's Players tend to strengthen their influence on the Internet by availing themselves to social media sites. In doing so, they are able to reach out to new media users and gain more followers. In the case where doing something because you love doing it isn't enough, some are also motivated to make Let's Plays for financial reasons. While this is frowned upon by some members of the phenomenon, others consider it a positive and creative line of work.

In the case of commercialization, Let's Plays are believed to contribute to added online sales of videogames, increased attention towards videogames and increasing public awareness around obscure or old games. This becomes particularly important due to the increase in independent developers making their way onto the gaming scene to promote their products. Lacking the commercial structure and popular brand names that the large-scale developers have enjoyed for years, independent games need to be promoted through creative means in order to become established as good quality brands. Game developers could therefore be motivated to seek help and constructive criticism through Let's Players, especially those who are deeply involved in a particular genre that coincides with the type of game that is to be promoted. A horror game would probably benefit more from being played and reviewed by a Let's Player specializing in horror games than someone who plays racing or puzzle games. In accordance with increased Internet access (Rainie & Wellman, 2012), such online reviews are more frequently used than ever before and can be assumed to have a certain impact on sales.

A certain degree of technological knowledge is required by both the Let's Players and their followers. Participants in the Let's Play phenomenon need to be well-versed in navigating the Internet, utilizing various social media sites, understanding where and why the Let's Players choose to upload their videos as well as having a basic need or desire to perform these actions. Let's Players with a high degree of technological knowledge can exploit this by carefully and meticulously editing their videos before uploading them, possibly adding to what could already be acknowledged as a positive viewing experience. The informants in this study all agreed that some advanced degree of insight or visible effort in the content they chose to watch was a central determinant for choosing certain Let's Players above others. They wanted to be entertained, educated, relive childhood memories and share the gaming

LET'S GRADUATE - THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF LET'S PLAYS

experience with the Let's Player. Considering that positive experiences are shared across networks (Dunn, Gilbert & Wilson, 2011; Gable et al., 2004; Kim & Phalak, 2012), Let's Players have every reason to put extra work and effort into the videos they make.

The Let's Players themselves are also a large part of the total attraction of the phenomenon. While playing a game and showing the end result to an audience may seem simple at first glance, charismatic and knowledgeable Let's Players seem to have a certain 'edge' when compared to their inexperienced counterparts. In some cases, the informants' decision about whether or not to watch a Let's Play is exclusively determined by personal qualities possessed by the commentator; if their behavior seems theatrical and artificial, chances are that their material will be avoided in favor of others'. A rule of thumb seems to revolve around showing genuine reactions to what is happening in the game, and avoid exaggerating that which does not have to be exaggerated. Dinnerbone (2012) compares Let's Plays to sports commentary, which is admittedly rather fitting, although the result of the game will ultimately depend on the Let's Player's actions and decisions while the same cannot be said in the case of sports. Ultimately, however, the Let's Player will either add or subtract to the overall viewer experience and should be considered before uploading the final product.

So, why are these findings important to the field of psychology? First of all, the Internet is constantly expanding and has become a part of everyday social lives. Internet activity has been regarded with skepticism from a wide variety of researchers, and a constant debate about whether the Internet affects the human mind in a benevolent or malevolent way is now raging across a wide variety of scientific fields. Ironically, much of this debate is being conducted through the Internet. How can this monograph contribute to this debate? Simply put, the answer boils down to a highly standardized reply to most questions within the field of psychology; it depends. While some are more easily susceptible to negatively loaded Internet content, others possess the rationale and critical thinking that allows them to focus their attention to positively loaded Internet content. Based on the answers given by the nine informants in this study, the Let's Play phenomenon could be described as positive in that it allows people of similar interests to get together to discuss their hobby, discover new games, become part of a virtual community and receive information they could not access otherwise.

Secondly, virtual communities are becoming increasingly more popular. There is a definitive attraction to cluster together and discuss openly one's personal hobbies and spare time activities, especially on the Internet where people from different corners of the world are

present. While this does fit under the term of parasocial interaction (Bartsch & Viehoff, 2010; Horton & Wohl, 1956/2006; Rubin & Perse, 1987), the informants do not seem to meet the requirements of high-level fan intensity described by Stever (2009). They all have a relaxed relationship with the phenomenon and do not experience it as being intrusive in their everyday functioning. Studying virtual communities where the members appear to benefit from their membership could be an interesting future field of study for practitioners and researchers within the fields of both positive psychology and media psychology alike.

Another major debate within the field of videogames is whether or not gaming could be considered a social phenomenon. The findings in this monograph suggest that parasocial interaction through membership in virtual Let's Play communities has the potential to develop into real-life socialization. So-called meet-ups have grown increasingly common, and are now a staple in various gaming conventions where Let's Players and game developers get together and mingle. These findings are consistent with Yee's (2014) descriptions of the gamer as a typically socially well-adjusted person with colleagues, friends and family far outside of the gaming world. Let's Plays can also be said to add a new social gaming dimension through providing virtual 'friends' to play games with. While the viewer cannot change the gameplay directly, they can post comments and tips to guide the Let's Player towards the end of the game. This form of knowledge sharing is an important aspect of virtual community behavior (Chiu et al., 2006).

The field of occupational psychology could also benefit from studying the development of such virtual communities. In the case of Let's Plays, the phenomenon has evolved to the point where some selected individuals are essentially paid to play videogames. While some Let's Players play through older games that have been on the market for a while, others are given access to alpha- and beta versions of unpublished videogames for testing. Playtesting is not a new phenomenon, however; most games go through this elaborate process where various bugs and glitches are removed to optimize the final gameplay experience. Let's Plays merely supply the option of showing this process for an audience, allowing feedback to the developers from the viewpoints of potential future customers. Playtesting can therefore be said to fit under the umbrella term 'creative work', a category of unconventional and diverse jobs that are rising rapidly (Rainie & Wellman, 2012).

Lastly, this monograph is an attempt at answering Mortensen's (2009) call for scientific reports on gaming from a psychological perspective made by an individual with above

average interest in and experience with videogames. The researcher possesses first-hand knowledge about the majority of the communities and games mentioned in this report, and has more than 20 years of experience with videogames in general. Experiencing the gameplay scenario as a participant instead of a casual observer is paramount to understanding the motivational pull of game-related phenomena. For instance it makes little sense to write about in-game immersion if one has not played games before, because undergoing the actual experience is so important in order to understand it. The same could be true for viewing Let's Plays; a basic understanding and interest in games needs to be present in the individual in order for them to seek out these forms of game-related media content. The informants all agree that they have their own separate reasons for wanting to watch Let's Plays, but they share in common the fact that they all have a need and a motivation to seek them out. These reasons are listed in section 4.1 through 4.5, and form the backbone of why these nine individuals chose to be part of the Let's Play phenomenon.

5 Limitations and Future Research

This section contains a list of limitations of the study as well as implications for future research within the field of Let's Plays. Three possible limitations to the study were identified, and guidelines for future research are supplied based on the results in section 4.

5.1 Limitations of the study

A total of three possible limitations of the study were identified, largely focused around the population sample and the design of the interview survey. These limitations will be discussed, and the choices made by the researcher will be defended in this section.

5.1.1 Sample Size Issues

The issue of sample size was discovered relatively early in the data gathering process. The initial low reply rate was expected due to the majority of communication happening through social media sites. For example, it is possible that there was a certain degree of distrust towards the research and the e-mails that were sent out as invitations to participate in the study. Additionally, there were communication issues due to technological reasons; one informant had his computer break down and could no longer maintain contact with the researcher throughout the course of the information gathering. Another informant dropped out

LET'S GRADUATE - THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF LET'S PLAYS

after initial contact was made, and expressed annoyance over the newly established Google+ messaging system on YouTube. These incidents, however, are outside of the researcher's sphere of control; there was little to be done other than search for more informants elsewhere.

There was also a very low response rate from informants who make Let's Plays actively, and as a result the view of the Let's Play phenomenon from their angle is therefore not highlighted very well. A total of two Let's Players chose to participate in the study, while the majority did not reply to the researcher's attempts to reach them. However, this is probably due to the variety in the amount of subscribers each Let's Player has. The majority of those asked to participate in this research had anywhere from 200,000 to 700,000 subscribers, and did not reveal personal contact information in their profiles. This means that all communication with these potential informants had to happen through YouTube's own messaging system, competing for the attention of the Let's Player with hundreds of thousands of fans and simultaneously suffering the effects of Google+'s introduction into the system. Expecting a reply from these informants in due time before delivering the report would therefore be overly optimistic, especially considering the short timeframe of the project. However, one interesting remark is that the Let's Players who did choose to participate could offer a vast amount of knowledge about the phenomenon, proving that subscriber numbers does not necessarily reflect the amount of passion and interest that Let's Players put into their work. Future researchers would do well to seek out informants with comparatively less subscribers than the ones mentioned above. It would also be good to do some previous investigation around the Let's Player before initial contact is made, such as by checking how long the Let's Player has been uploading this type of videos, how much time expires between each movie upload, if there is considerable effort put into video editing and checking the comments section for other information related to the Let's Player.

5.1.2 Data Saturation

Due to the lack of responses from Let's Players, much of the data collected in this analysis was gathered from fans of Let's Plays and game developers. While the informants did share a common genuine interest in Let's Plays, there is every reason to believe that the answers provided do not necessarily represent the general opinion of the various Let's Play communities scattered across the Internet. While the information has been compared with the researcher's previous knowledge of the phenomenon as well as fan feedback found in the comments section of several Let's Play videos, the aim of this analysis is not generalization. It

is rather meant as an introduction to what could potentially be an important contribution in several of the ongoing debates within the field of videogames, from the sociability of games to the emergence of independent game developers onto the gaming market. Its main point of focus is the determinants of what motivates gamers and game-interested individuals to seek out this particular phenomenon, and how they choose to use it in order to benefit from it.

Future studies of Let's Plays can benefit from the advice provided in section 5.1.1, namely by contacting Let's Players with fewer subscribers and longer experience in the field. YouTube provides detailed statistics of when accounts were registered as well as when videos were uploaded, providing the researcher with useful first-hand knowledge before initial contact is made. Furthermore, studying specific Let's Play communities instead of Let's Plays on YouTube in general would be a good strategy in order to find community-specific motivators. There is every reason to believe that a person who has become part of a horror game-specific Let's Play community has other reasons for joining than a person connected to a driving game-oriented Let's Play community. Additionally some Let's Players may choose to provide personal contact information on their own websites, making communication easier.

5.1.3 Interview Design

Lastly there is the issue of the chosen interview design. Originally, audio-based interviews through Skype were planned and the recording software *PowerGrama* was intended to be used for transcription. However, due to the requests of the majority of the informants, audio-based interviews were excluded. An interview survey was structured instead (**appendix B**), and supplied to the informants along with participant information (**appendix A**). There are several reasons for choosing to construe the interview in the form of a survey. First of all, the interview was not intended to affect the everyday lives of the informants. Using a survey would allow the informants to answer the questions on their own leisure. If the interview was to be conducted through Skype, the informants and the researcher would have to settle appointments across a wide variety of time zones. It would also potentially be considered an invasive nuisance to some informants, which was never the intention to begin with. Some informants may have also chosen a survey-based interview due to their lack of experience concerning the researcher's fluency in spoken English.

The amount of information provided by the informants through the use of the survey was more than sufficient in regard to analysis. The questions were asked in such a way that the informants' thoughts about the Let's Play phenomenon would be in focus, although initial

assumptions made by the researcher did direct the construction of the survey itself. To allow for added freedom of response, question 17 allowed the informants to add any information they felt the survey did not cover earlier. This field was most often left blank, suggesting that the previous 16 questions were thorough in their coverage of the phenomenon. Additionally, the intention behind the interview survey was to expose central motivational themes of the Let's Play phenomenon in general, not community-specific themes and motivators. The survey is therefore, for all intents and purposes, considered to be structured in a way that provided sufficient information for the purpose of this study.

5.2 Implications for future research

This study has uncovered several intriguing themes from a media phenomenon within a field where little to no available scientific research has been conducted before. Obtaining an understanding of how game-related virtual communities are organized could contribute to the future development of the gaming industry in several ways. First of all, videogame communities and the social networks contained within them are all important predictors to the sharing of a gaming experience with others. This is possibly determined by the emotional experience that a game provides (Cohen, 2013). Similar results are found in various scientific studies related to social sharing of other media content (Dunn, Gilbert & Wilson, 2011; Gable et al., 2004; Kim & Phalak, 2012). An interesting suggestion for future research arising from this finding revolves around genre-specific community sharing behaviors. For instance, is a fan of horror games more likely than a fan of driving games to share gaming experiences with their social networks or the gaming communities they are members of? If there is a difference, could this account for variation in sales on gaming platforms such as Steam or GOG.com?

Studying separate Let's Play communities could also be an interesting field of research. This monograph has offered a wide angle of motivational sources within the Let's Play phenomenon in general, but has not gone in-depth into individual Let's Play communities to examine community-specific behaviors. Virtual communities should be considered unique and separate entities on the Internet, and usually come with their own sets of rules and administration. Some individuals tend to belong to several virtual communities at once, and will therefore be valuable key informants when investigating online community norms.

Future researchers would also do well to consider the propositions presented in the previous section regarding limitations of the study. Much can be learned from the difficulties surrounding informant recruitment, and a full understanding of how to contact key informants

could potentially save the researcher a lot of time and effort. The more active a researcher happens to be on social media sites, the higher the chance of successfully catching the attention of Let's Players due to their own high levels of social networking activity. Furthermore, the researcher needs to specify early what the purpose of the research is to avoid making the informants paranoid or suspicious of the intentions behind the information gathering. In some cases, informants can also be included in lotteries where they can win prizes. This was done with success in this monograph; two out of nine informants received gift cards that they could use freely on Steam to buy games and game-related software. Rewards make participating feel less boring and invasive, and gives the informants a reason to participate outside of just contributing to scientific knowledge. However, it is possible that this strategy only pays off if the informant sample is relatively small.

Lastly, studying Let's Plays requires a certain amount of creativity on the researcher's behalf. Studying virtual communities is a new form of psychological research where a certain degree of previous experience with the community under study is useful, if not obligatory.

6 Conclusion

Gaming as a hobby has changed drastically since the 1980s, and the videogame industry is constantly developing into new directions as the demands for entertaining media are increasing. It is up to media researchers from all fields to pay close attention to this development, in order to increase the understanding of what gamers want in their products and how they go about using them. Due to the parallel continuous expansion of the gaming industry and peoples' online activities, new gaming phenomena and communities are making their way onto the Internet. A comprehensive understanding of these phenomena will potentially hold vast amounts of valuable insight into the mind of the gamer, and contribute to the healthy growth of the industry as a whole.

The purpose of this research has been to offer the reader a brief glimpse into the world of Let's Plays, how they are organized and what motivates certain individuals to seek out this videogame phenomenon for entertainment and informative purposes. After interviewing nine informants with various cultural backgrounds and scouring the Internet for relevant literature, a large data corpus was collected and subjected to thematic analysis. Five major themes were revealed based on the informants' answers to the interview questions. Limitations of the study

and suggested guidelines for future research on the subject were subsequently listed to allow other media researchers to expand upon the knowledge of Let's Plays. Based on these results, it is clear that the Let's Play phenomenon holds untold possibilities within the world of videogames. Let's Plays are not solely meant for entertainment or information; they are also active contributors to generating hype around videogames, establishing social virtual gaming communities as well as being an important creative outlet for talented filmmakers and editors.

Lastly, for researchers in social sciences operating within the field of work- and organizational psychology, it is important to understand the development of creative occupations. Let's Plays are not just creative outlets where anyone can showcase their gaming skills and establish networks; they are also financed by external backers and organizations, thus making them into prototypes for full-fledged jobs. For some, Let's Plays may also be portals into the elusive world of the gaming industry. Due to the relative "newness" of Let's Plays, further in-depth research is required in order to evaluate the true potential this modern media phenomenon, and this monograph will hopefully provide a thorough introduction where inspiration for future research can be garnered.

This monograph is, to the researcher's knowledge, the first scientific report on the Let's Play phenomenon. Finding relevant literature related to this field of study therefore required the researcher to take an interdisciplinary approach to the literature search, especially when establishing a basic understanding of the videogame industry's development became necessary. Psychological theory was applied to account for the motivational aspects of why the informants chose to make or watch Let's Plays, as well as detailing the public's media usage behaviors in general. Taking all this into account, this monograph will hopefully provide a structured and interesting insight into a growing modern media phenomenon.

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APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION DOCUMENT

**Participant Information: Let's Graduate – A Deductive Thematic Analysis
of the Let's Play community**

Background and purpose of the study:

The purpose of this Master's Thesis in Occupational- and Organizational Psychology is to investigate central aspects of the Let's Play gaming community, in order to improve the understanding of how social online gaming networks function. The project is conducted under the Institute of Psychology at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology by an individual MA candidate, and is independent from other organizations.

You have been selected as an informant due to your connection with the Let's Play community, and your participation is valuable to the project.

Participating in the study:

Participating in this study requires you to answer some questions regarding the Let's Play phenomenon, your experiences with the community and your general feelings towards gaming as social media.

Storing information:

All information that is gathered from you will be treated confidentially. Only the MA candidate and his supervisor will have access to your private data and recordings. Once the project is concluded in May 2014, all stored information about you will be deleted.

Voluntary participation:

Participation in this project is entirely voluntary. As an informant, you have every right to withdraw any information you have given since the beginning of the project.

Questions regarding the study:

If you have any questions regarding this MA project, please direct them to either the MA candidate or his supervisor using the contact information provided here:

- MA Candidate / Project leader: Kristoffer Fjællingsdal – motsaenggin@gmail.com
- Project supervisor: Prof. Ingunn Hagen – ingunn.hagen@svt.ntnu.no

This project has been reported to Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD)

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Please answer the following questions as detailed as possible. If you consider any questions to be inappropriate, or you for some reason don't feel like answering them, you are not obliged to do so. Your participation is entirely voluntary, and any information gathered through this interview will be deleted once the project is over.

Once you have filled out your answers, please save the document and send it to the following e-mail along with any questions or comments you may have:
motsaenggin@gmail.com

1. What got you into Let's Plays?
2. What is your general opinion about the phenomenon of Let's Play? (Anything you'd like to add here goes; positive or negative doesn't matter!)
3. Why do you make Let's Plays? (If you don't make Let's Plays personally, just leave this blank. Livestreaming games also counts as Let's Plays.)
4. Why do you watch Let's Plays / LiveStreams of gaming? (If you don't watch Let's Plays personally, just leave this blank.)
5. Do you have any thoughts or stories related to Let's Plays that you feel are funny or interesting?
6. Do you ever socialize with Let's Players? (Talking through Skype or Facebook, commenting on their videos, meet up with them in real-life, etc.)
7. What are your thoughts about your fans / subscribers? (If you don't make Let's Plays personally, just leave this blank.)

LET'S GRADUATE - THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF LET'S PLAYS

8. Would you say that your subscribers become part of your community? (If you don't make Let's Plays personally, just leave this blank.)

9. As a subscriber to Let's Plays, do you feel like a part of a community? (If you don't subscribe to Let's Plays, just leave this blank.)

10. What forms of social media do you use in relation with your Let's Play-related activities? (YouTube, Twitter, Skype, Steam, Facebook etc.)

11. To what degree do you see yourself as a part of the Let's Play Community? (For instance, do you often message Let's Players, start projects with other Let's Players, meet other Let's Players in real life, etc.)

12. Do you know if there is any form of interaction going on between Let's Players in regard to which series are popular to LP?

13. What are your thoughts about what makes for an interesting LP?

14. Would you say that you watch Let's Plays mostly because of the game being played, or because of the Let's Player him-/herself?

15. What are your thoughts about Let's Players including download links or buying information about the games they play in their video descriptions?

16. What are your thoughts about Let's Plays contributing to increased sales of certain games on gaming platforms like Steam?

17. Do you have any special comments you wish to make regarding Let's Plays?

APPENDIX C: NSD ETHICAL APPROVAL

Norsk samfunnsvitenskapelig datatjeneste AS
NORWEGIAN SOCIAL SCIENCE DATA SERVICES



NSD
Norsk samfunnsvitenskapelig datatjeneste AS
Postboks 1047 Blindern
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Ingunn Hagen
Psykologisk institutt NTNU

7491 TRONDHEIM

Vår dato: 21.01.2014

Vår ref: 36933 / 2 / HT

Deres dato:

Deres ref:

TILBAKEMELDING PÅ MELDING OM BEHANDLING AV PERSONOPPLYSNINGER

Vi viser til melding om behandling av personopplysninger, mottatt 07.01.2014. Meldingen gjelder prosjektet:

36933	<i>Lets Graduate - A deductive thematic analysis of the Lets Play Community</i>
Behandlingsansvarlig	NTNU, ved institusjonens øverste leder
Daglig ansvarlig	Ingunn Hagen
Student	Kristoffer Skomsøy Fjællingsdal

Personvernombudet har vurdert prosjektet og finner at behandlingen av personopplysninger er meldepliktig i henhold til personopplysningsloven § 31. Behandlingen tilfredsstiller kravene i personopplysningsloven.

Personvernombudets vurdering forutsetter at prosjektet gjennomføres i tråd med opplysningene gitt i meldeskjemaet, korrespondanse med ombudet, ombudets kommentarer samt personopplysningsloven og helseregisterloven med forskrifter. Behandlingen av personopplysninger kan settes i gang.

Det gjøres oppmerksom på at det skal gis ny melding dersom behandlingen endres i forhold til de opplysninger som ligger til grunn for personvernombudets vurdering. Endringsmeldinger gis via et eget skjema, <http://www.nsd.uib.no/personvern/meldeplikt/skjema.html>. Det skal også gis melding etter tre år dersom prosjektet fortsatt pågår. Meldinger skal skje skriftlig til ombudet.

Personvernombudet har lagt ut opplysninger om prosjektet i en offentlig database, <http://pvo.nsd.no/prosjekt>.

Personvernombudet vil ved prosjektets avslutning, 15.05.2014, rette en henvendelse angående status for behandlingen av personopplysninger.

Vennlig hilsen

Katrine Utaaker Segadal

Hildur Thorarensen

Kontaktperson: Hildur Thorarensen tlf: 55 58 26 54

Vedlegg: Prosjektvurdering

Kopi: Kristoffer Skomsøy Fjællingsdal motsaenggin@gmail.com

Dokumentet er elektronisk produsert og godkjent ved NSDs rutiner for elektronisk godkjenning.

Asklipgata 1, 0654 Østros

0400 NSD - Universitetsbibliotek, Postboks 1047 Blindern, 0316 Oslo. Tlf: +47 22 85 21 11. nsd@nsd.uib.no

NSD/NSD AS - Norges teknisk-naturvitenskapelige universitet, 7491 Trondheim. Tlf: +47 73 91 15 00. kare.saravestedt@ntnu.no

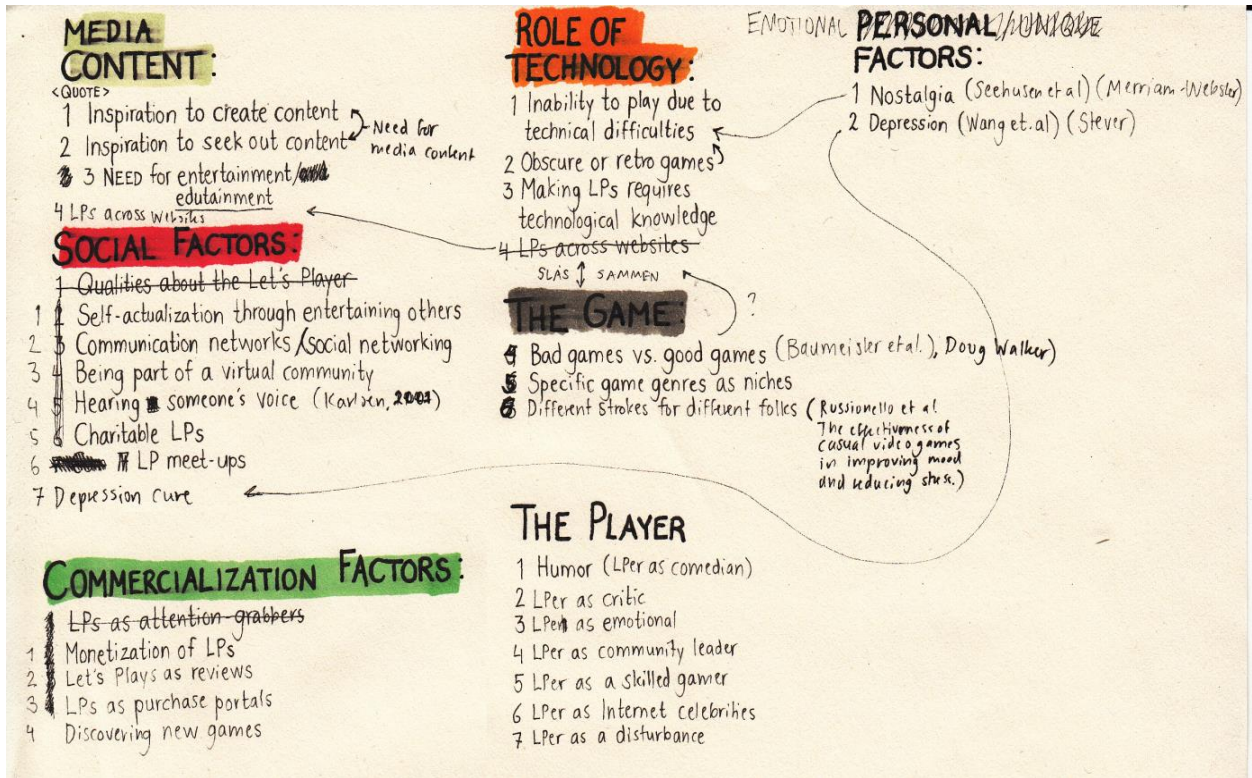
NSD/NSD AS - Universitete, Tromsø, 9007 Tromsø. Tlf: +47 77 51 43 00. nsd@hsk.uib.no

APPENDIX D: INITIAL CODING SCHEME

QUESTION:	INFORMANT ANSWER:	CODING:
<p>1. What got you into Let's Plays?</p>	<p>I started searching up certain playlists relating to horror games on <u>youtube</u>. I couldn't play certain games at the time and I eventually I found certain let's players I liked and continued to watch them on the <u>xbox youtube app</u>.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Motivation to search for content (Need). • Horror games (Specific game genre). • YouTube (Media site). • Inability to play certain games (Technical limitations). • Likes specific Let's Players (The Let's Player's Personal Qualities). • Xbox YouTube App (Media usage).

Color coding scheme used for initial coding. Each colored data extract in the second column has a corresponding color code in the third column. The words in parentheses were used by the researcher to categorize the various codes, making them easier to collect as subcategories under the emerging main themes.

APPENDIX E – DRAFT OF THEMES AND SUBTHEMES



A temporary draft of the themes included for the final analysis. The theme called “The Game” was merged with “Role of Technology”, and the subthemes within “Personal / Unique Factors” were included under “Social Factors” and “Role of Technology” after consideration.

APPENDIX F: THEMES AND SUBTHEMES

Media Content

1. Need for media content
2. Need for entertaining content

Social Factors

1. Social networking
2. Partaking in a virtual community
3. Hearing someone's voice
4. Let's Play meet-ups
5. Depression relief

Commercial Factors

1. Monetized Let's Plays
2. Let's Plays as detailed game reviews
3. Let's Plays as purchase portals
4. Discovering new games through Let's Plays

Role of Technology

1. Inability to play due to technological limitations
2. Obscure or retro games
3. Technological knowledge
4. Bad games vs. good games
5. Specific game genres as niches
6. Let's Plays across websites

Role of the Let's Player

1. Let's Player as comedian
 2. Let's Player as critic
 3. Let's Player as emotional
 4. Let's Player as reference person
 5. Let's Player as a skilled gamer
 6. Let's Player as Internet "celebrity"
 7. Let's Player as disturbance
-

APPENDIX G: STEVER'S LEVELS OF FAN INTENSITY

Level	Description
*Level 1	Negative interest in the star. Is an "anti-fan."
*Level 2	No interest in stars or in being a fan of anyone.
*Level 3	Average interest in celebrities but without any clear interest in any individual or individuals.
Level 4	Above average interest in stars or media without the emphasis on one particular star. Obviously a media fan but not a specific fan of one individual.
Level 5	Interest in a star or small group of stars to the exclusion of Others but interest is limited to the stars' work (not the Stars as people).
Level 6	Interpersonal interest in star that exacts considerable cost to The fan in time, money and effort to follow the star. In spite Of this cost, interest is not obsessive and does not chronically Interfere in daily life.
Level 7	Obsessive interest in the star to the point where the interest Intrudes on the everyday reality of the fan. High functioning In everyday life in spite of the obsession (has a job, family Etc. and meets obligations in this area).
Level 8	Interest is clearly pathological in that it affects the fan's health In a negative way, prompts occasional (or chronic) suicidal Ideation, or in some other way is clearly not in the best interests Of the fan. Interferes with the pursuit of normal employment And/or family and significant relationships.

Source: Stever, 2009