Introduction

Let's Play videos (or LPs) are recordings of gameplay with commentary, often made to be humorous, informative, or some combination of both. These recordings can be videos with live, post, or subtitled commentary, or screenshots of the game with text commentary from the player (LPer). LPs can take a variety of forms, ranging from straightforward walkthroughs with commentary on a game (where the LPer talks through their playthrough, such as in the Metal Gear Solid 3 LP by Chip Cheezum)[1], to rewriting or adding a new narrative to the game as it plays out (sometimes presenting the new narrative alongside the original, as is the case in the Avalon Code LP by Didja Redo)[2]. Some LPs demonstrate playing a game in a new or challenging way, such as the LP of Super Mario 64 where the LPer played the entire game using only their feet[3]. Originally starting as a hobby around 2005 on the Something Awful (or SA) forums (Klepek, 2015), LPs have grown in scope and popularity to allow for LPers to pursue full-time careers in making them. The small amount of current research examining Let's Plays has focused on the contemporary popularity of the phenomenon on YouTube. But little published work has been done on the origins of Let's Plays as a novel media form and the community where they developed. The context of the SA forums has a definite influence on the sub-communities that form on it, as previous research has shown (Pater et al, 2014). In order to address the gap in LP research, and the specific origin of LP from a sub-community on Something Awful, a series of open-ended interviews were conducted with 34 creators of Let's Plays from the Something Awful Let's Play (or SALP) subforum. The findings from these

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[1] https://lparchive.org/Metal-Gear-Solid-3-Snake-Eater/
[2] https://lparchive.org/Avalon-Code/
[3] https://lparchive.org/Super-Mario-64-(With-Feet)/

interviews were examined using concepts of serious leisure studies and cultural/subcultural capital, as the interviewed members reported motivations for taking part in the community based on the extrinsic and intrinsic rewards of increased self-worth and recognition from their peers. Participants reported several community practices on the SALP subforum that reflect serious leisure behaviors of constructing a shared group identity. One example of this that we found was a reported notion of 'bringing something to the table,' as a way for community members to justify their contributions to the LP subculture, as well as a form of gatekeeping in the early years of the subforum. Finally, the analysis of this serious leisure culture provides an explanation of how this subculture was adopted and made more mainstream by the larger YouTube communities.

Background

LPs have been shown to be effective tools for games studies scholars in understanding how players experience games, and how performative identities online can inform the ways in which an audience experiences interactive media (Piittinen, 2018; Nguyen, 2016; Gekker, 2018). Beyond studies on how LPs can be used to examine other subjects, there are other texts that seek to understand LPs themselves. Texts by Burwell (2016) and Fjaellingsdal (2014), among others, look at LPs as a form of paratext, as paratexts, "are essential to the accumulation of gaming capital, for it is through the social space of the paratexts that gamers interact with each other (Burwell and Miller, 2016)." Paratexts refers here to "the wide range of discourses, texts, and practices beyond games themselves" found in game culture (Burwell and Miller, 2016). This work on LPs as paratexts has further been extended by more recent authors, such as Markocki, who used Burwell and Miller's work as a basis to examine the relationship between independent game developers and Let's Players (Markocki, 2021). Other authors examine the relationships

between the LPer and their audience, with a focus on YouTube LPers (Kreissl et al, 2021). These authors provide refinements to the definition of LPs, especially when considering similar forms of online content, like live streaming. Kreissl has put forward a succinct way of distinguishing between Let's Play and live stream, suggesting to "define Let's Plays as videos that are distributed online not as livestreams but for asynchronous on-demand consumption (2021, pg 1024)." This is important, as while the two mediums share many similar features (and streamers may also produce LP content, and vice versa), recognizing the differences between them allows scholars to better understand the nuances of each.

Much of the previous work focuses on how LPs operate on YouTube, as the scope and reach of LPs on YouTube is much greater than those that originated on Something Awful. A common thread in many of these works is found in *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture* (Burgess et al, 2009), which provides a framework for understanding the media culture of YouTube in which LPs can be studied. Again, since much of the existing literature is focused on LPs on YouTube, using this framework makes sense, though it can be extended to encompass LPs from the Something Awful Let's Play subforum as well. Other authors have demonstrated how YouTube LPers can be examined for insights into LP as a whole. Olberg, for example, used YouTube LPers as a basis for examining the performative nature of LP, comparing LPs of similar games from the same channels in 2010 and 2020, highlighting how LP practices on that platform had evolved over the decade (Olberg, 2021).

These texts, however, are predominantly focused on LPs on YouTube, and do not provide context for how LPs moved from the SALP subforum to wider popularity on YouTube. Most texts merely mention the origins of LPs on the SALP subforum, without examining how the

forums acted upon the practices and behaviors of LPers[4]. In order to address this gap, this paper focuses on the activities and experiences of early LPers on the SALP subforum. While the first LPs were posted on the main Games forum of Something Awful, the SALP subforum started in 2007 and provided a central location for discussion threads. Even today, the SALP subforum is very active, and there are no other online LP communities that match it in size and longevity.

Serious leisure

A key lens for understanding the origins of what was essentially a community of hobbyist media practice can be found in literature from serious leisure studies. Serious leisure concepts are an excellent framework to work from, as many of their elements are reflected in the SALP community and culture. Stebbins (1992, pg 3) defines serious leisure as "[a] systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity that participants find so substantial and interesting that, in the typical case, they launch themselves on a career centered on acquiring and expressing its special skills, knowledge and experience."

There are six characteristics of serious leisure, according to Stebbins. First, there should be a need to *persevere* in the serious leisure activity. Secondly, there must be a way to find a *career* in the endeavor, through personal *effort* from specially acquired *knowledge, training, or skills*. Next, there must be a number of *durable benefits or outcomes*, such as self-actualization, self-enrichment, self-expression, regeneration or renewal of self, feelings of accomplishment, enhancement of self-image, social interaction, belongingness, and lasting physical products of

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[4] While there are other successful LPers who had presences on Something Awful in general, such as the Yogscast and TotalBiscuit, they were not included in our research for a few reasons. For one, because of our focus on the SALP subforum as the origin of LP, we excluded LPers who did not take part in it. The Yogscast, who started making LP content in 2010, well after the SALP subforum was established, never participated in the subforum at all. And while Totalbiscuit did have two LP threads in the subforum, both were abandoned, indicating that he did not have much, if any, influence on the SALP subforum community.

the activity. Participants in serious leisure tend to *identify* strongly with their chosen pursuits, and a *unique ethos* grows up around each expression of it (Stebbins, 2006).

There are many serious leisure pursuits that have been studied, such as barbershop singing (Stebbins, 1996), fishing (Yoder, 1997), bushwalking (Hamilton-Smith, 1993), long-distance running (Yair, 1990), and competitive swimming (Hastings et al., 1995). Stebbins also describes the different categories of amateurs, hobbyists, and volunteers that commonly participate in different forms of serious leisure, and the rewards they seek from participating in serious leisure activities. Rewards from serious leisure include personal enrichment, self-actualization, self-expression, self-gratification, re-creation of oneself, and financial return. There are also social rewards to participation in serious leisure, which includes social attraction, group accomplishment, and contribution to the maintenance and development of the group. These rewards are primarily personal in nature, and different serious leisure communities assign different levels of importance to each, based on the nature of their particular hobby/leisure activity (Stebbins, 2006).

By understanding serious leisure as a common element of hobbyist communities, we can then see how the SALP community reflects these concepts. The entire genre of LP originated as a form of amateur content creation, and, despite there being several top LPers on YouTube with sizable incomes, the majority of the community members do not consider themselves as 'professionals.' As we discuss later in this paper, members of the SALP community have developed a unique ethos to their hobbyist pursuit, and are largely motivated by non-monetary rewards. Almost all of these rewards are intrinsic, and financial returns or other extrinsic forms were often ranked lower in importance than the other forms of reward. With this understanding of serious leisure, we can then move on to expanding the forms of social rewards associated with

the early and niche SALP community by incorporating concepts of cultural and subcultural capital.

Cultural/Subcultural Capital

Distinguishing between what is considered mainstream and niche cultures is of interest to our work, as it serves as a way of demonstrating how the work that has been done on LPs on YouTube compares to the history of the Something Awful Let's Play subforum. As such, cultural capital literature complements and builds on an understanding of the practice as serious leisure. Cultural capital refers to a form of social recognition and distinction that is usually used as a way to separate high and popular culture, based primarily on the work by Bourdieu (1984). Sarah Thornton, in her research on U.K. club cultures in the 90s, further explored the ways in which cultural capital can manifest in subcultural communities. Thornton uses the term subcultures to "identify those taste cultures which are labelled by media as subcultures and the word 'subcultural' as a synonym for those practices that clubbers call 'underground' (1995)." In this way, we can view LPs from YouTube constituting the 'mainstream' form of cultural capital, and the SALP subforum providing the 'niche' or subculture. Historically speaking, however, the roles of these two cultures were originally reversed, as the SALP subforum once served as the dominant place to find LPs. Up until LPs became massively popular on YouTube, the SALP subforum acted as the primary form of LP culture, while LPs external to it were secondary. It still holds true, however, that recognition from peers within the same subcultural community can serve as another form of extrinsic reward for a serious leisure pursuit.

Furthermore, we can connect discussions of subculture with online communities by drawing on the work of Ken Gelder, who we can draw inferences from to bridge the gap between serious leisure and cultural capital, as he examines work from authors on participatory cultures,

such as Henry Jenkins, which often overlap with serious leisure principles (2007). In his book *Subcultures: Cultural Histories and Social Practice* (2007), he provides a synthesis of many texts on subcultures which we will refer to when examining the LP community later in this paper. Gelder points out that Jenkins' description of fandoms as 'textual poachers' reflects subcultural practices, "not so much under the influence of the media they saturate themselves in, [but] as unorthodox users of that media, shaping or recasting it to suit their needs (2007, p. 143)." Since Let's Plays are made through the remixing of video games as texts, Let's Players can also be situated within a legacy of media practice associated with textual poaching, in which a new subculture emerges around a specific type of paratextual gaming activity and is then later appropriated by the mainstream.

From the literature on serious leisure and cultural capital, we can see that members of a serious leisure community participate in its practices based on a shared community identity and specific rewards that act as motivation to continue. In order to investigate the beginnings of this popular media, it is therefore the intention of this article to use the reviewed concepts as a way of understanding the motivations of early LPers getting involved in making LPs in the Something Awful LP subforum, which informed the evolution of LP practices and their later popularization on YouTube.

Methods

As part of ongoing research into Let's Plays, we conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with 34 individuals who are current or former Let's Players on the Something Awful LP subforum.

Candidate Selection

We identified candidates for interview through purposive sampling. Criteria for selection included number of completed LPs on the SALP Archive[5], period of time they were active on the SALP subforum, and availability of contact information for recruitment. We examined the SALP Archive to find LPers who had completed LPs at different points in the years the subforum had existed. This ensured that the accounts of their participation would cover the 12 years the subforum has been active, and provide a historical context for the findings. The selection of these candidates was based on the LPs produced by these individuals, in order to understand their perspective on why and how they make LP content. We selected LPers based on the different styles of commentary and visual media format they used in their work, with the intention of including as wide of a variety of styles in the selection.

Of less concern for our purposes was the popularity of the LPers, as we did not want to base our findings on the experiences of only the exceptional few. This method adopted purposive sampling, in order to have a clearly defined group of participants (Guest et al, 2006) based on a specific level of participation in the community. The most basic requirement for inclusion in our sampling was that they had completed a LP on the SALP subforum. That way, we can be certain that the people we interviewed were engaged enough in the serious leisure community to commit to finishing a LP project. Their responses provide a basis for understanding the practices of making and sharing LPs, as well as uncovering their motivations for initially joining the community. We also considered when participants started based on the rise of LPs on YouTube, which began sometime around 2010, when limits on video length were removed. We wanted to

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[5] https://lparchive.org/

ensure we could gather accounts from before and after these changes to the YouTube platform, to see what affect that might have had on the SALP subforum community.

Recruitment

Recruitment was conducted through multiple channels, using publicly available contact details for the selected candidates. Most candidates were contacted through email, with a few others were found through Twitter direct messages and Discord channels.

Interviews

The interviews were conducted over Discord voice chat, with audio recordings saved for later transcription and analysis. The intent of these interviews was to record participants' perspectives on the LP community. The length of each interview varied, with the longest totaling almost two hours, and the shortest lasting only 9 minutes. The average duration was about 33 minutes, and a total of 1076 minutes (roughly 17 hours) of audio was recorded. Upon review and analysis, the content of the interviews was deemed as sufficient to achieve data saturation (Guest et al, 2006; Creswell, 2003). Pseudonyms were used to refer to participants, as part of the ethical guidelines we agreed to as researchers. For this paper, any name with a quote attributed to it is one of our pseudonymized participants.

Table 1: List of 34 participant pseudonyms and periods of involvement in SALP. Information about when they were active in SALP and when they left is based on their recollections within the interviews and our estimates on their last LP threads in the SALP Archive.

Serious leisure Practices of Let's Plays

Participants told us about several different aspects of their experiences on the Something Awful Let's Play subforum, and we analyzed them in reference to the concepts of serious leisure and subcultural capital.

Reasons for joining SALP

One of the first notable findings we had from the interviews was that a sense of nostalgia was a common factor for participants to join the SALP subforum, which we discuss further in this section. We asked participants about their reasons for first getting into LPs, in order to explore what prompted them to become engaged in making LPs. This included what initially brought them to the subforum, either by recommendations from friends or coming across it on their own. Many participants responded that the shared experience of playing (or watching someone else playing) a game was a major factor for their enjoyment of LPs. For example, Drew, who has been active as an LPer on the subforum for several years now, said:

> To see someone playing a game that I enjoyed or that I hadn't played but wanted to check out and to see someone friendly and humorous doing it for… people at large, it was really interesting. It was just a form of entertainment I hadn't seen before.

Feelings of nostalgia were also blended into many of the participants' responses, which feeds into that sense of shared experience. Chantelle, a retired LPer from the subforum, who was active from around 2009 until 2015, said:

> My first experience with video games was watching someone else play them, and then separately I kind of developed game development type interests. I have a lot of trouble

finishing games myself so Let's Play's also just really good for research standpoint [sic] from that.

This shared sense of gameplay experience was a common response and can be understood as a unifying element of the SALP subforum. To Trevor, "the shared experience of playing a game with the audience… was really appealing to me," and Stanley noted that "what really drew [my friends and I] together was the aspect of sitting on a couch, playing it together…We'd watch each other play it and talk about it while we played." Thus, this shared sense of experience serves as a way for the SA LP community to maintain and develop itself, in accordance with one of the intrinsic rewards of serious leisure (Stebbins, 2006). This form of motivation spans participation across the life of the Something Awful LP subforum, with all participants referring to a shared sense of gaming experience factoring into their decision to join. Overall, a desire to share the experience of playing a game with others was a common motivating factor for our participants to join the SALP subforum.

The Intrinsic Satisfaction of Making LPs

Participants also reported self-satisfaction as among their main motivations for creating LPs. In this section, we describe the intrinsic satisfaction our participants reported from when they made LPs. We explored if participants had an audience in mind when they made LPs. The intent of asking about this was to determine if they were making LPs in order to appeal to a specific audience, and if that target audience had changed over time. Almost all of the responses emphasized making LPs specifically themselves rather than anyone else. Stanley, a currently active member of the subforum (joined the subforum around 2011 as far as he can recall), gave a response that mirrors what many others said:

I'm definitely doing it for me. I know there's a lot of people in Let's Play who are saying, "When you do a let's play, you do it for yourself and don't think about the audience. If no one watches your Let's Play like 'whatever'." And I partway buy into that 'cause I do the Let's Plays for myself 'cause I enjoy it and I hope that an audience will find them. If I was doing these Let's Plays, if I was putting all this effort into a video and I put it out there and the audience didn't come, I probably would have stopped. But I definitely started like 'I want to do something that I like and I'm going to assume… someone else wants to watch this too." And I hope they find the videos. And as long as I got a dozen or so people interacting with [the] thread, that's enough.

This intrinsic enjoyment of the process of making LPs, was reward enough for many participants to join the SALP community and contribute their own LPs. Finding a receptive audience to their content, however, was what convinced them to continue making LPs. Whilst most participants said they made LPs for personal enjoyment, rather than tailoring their LPs to a specific audience, the fact that there was a receptive audience of their peers was something of a bonus. Abigail responded that "I'd say we just kind of made stuff, put it out there and if anybody liked it, good for us," which was reflected in comments from Orson, who said, "…like I said, I am largely doing it to entertain myself. And I have been incredibly lucky that other people have liked it and found it funny." When considering previous work on the parasocial relationship between LPer and their audience, the emphasis has been placed on identifying how might the audience receive an LPer directly responding to them (Kreissl, 2021, pg. 1036), but in the context of an LP community like the SALP subforum, the reverse is also just as important. In summary, having this receptive audience kept participants interested in continuing to make LPs and contribute to the SALP community.

Shared Resources and Support

Another way in which serious leisure practices manifests in the LP subforum can be found in the resources and support made available to everyone. We found that, as part of the ways in which the SALP subforum constructs a serious leisure identity, the community creates and shares resources for newcomers to use. In order to assist newer LPers, the subforum has a few threads dedicated to guides and advice for how to make LPs. These guides provide instructions on how to record gameplay on different consoles, where to find free software for video and audio editing, and what kind of file formats are appropriate for uploading videos[6]. Taken together, these can be understood as another method by which the LP community creates their serious leisure identity, by making sure all members have basic skills and knowledge available to them, in order for them to make meaningful contributions to the community in return.

Community Organization

In terms of community maintenance and organization, we can examine the ways in which LPers talk about LPs in general. From the LP Archive[7], an off-site repository for some of the completed LPs from the subforum, we can see the various tags used to filter and categorize LPs. Tags created by the community to organize posts and LPs goes beyond just identifying the format of an LP (as using either videos, screenshots, text, or a hybrid of the three), with user-generated tags for different styles of commentary and gameplay. These signify the kinds of commentary in LPs (solo or group commentary, voice or subtitled), the different play-styles featured (100% completion, speedrun, or a challenge of some sort), and the overall tone of the

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[6] These guides are collected in the first few posts of the thread 'Tech Support Fort – Questions, Comments, and Codecs' found at https://forums.somethingawful.com/showthread.php?threadid=3590713
[7] https://lparchive.org/

LP (humorous, informative, narrative). Site users can then use these tags to recommend LPs to each other based on their personal preferences, as it provides a common set of terms that describes the important features of LPs. Thus, the ways in which the SALP subforum describes itself can "be viewed as behavioural expressions of participants' central life interests in those activities (Stebbins, 2006, pg 454)." When discussing what aspects of LPs they were attracted to, our participants frequently used those same terms, with most participants identifying the 'informative' style of LP as particularly attractive. Again, this indicates that the desire to share in the gameplay experience, as one of the intrinsic rewards of serious leisure, was an important factor for members of the subforum.

Extrinsic Rewards

While the primary motivations for joining the LP community came from the intrinsic rewards of shared identity and experiences, there emerged a range of other benefits to making LPs. Extrinsic rewards, such as financial compensation, do exist. However, the systems by which LPs can be monetized are younger than the SALP community itself. Most of the participants who monetize their content, and by extension LPers in general, use systems like Patreon, Twitch.tv subscriptions, and YouTube ad revenue. All of these platforms came after the advent of LPs on Something Awful; making money from LP content was rarely a consideration in the early years of the subforum. Since our participants were active in LP at different points in time, their opinions of LP monetization varied. Participants who entered the community after the introduction of monetization systems saw them as a potentially viable way to support themselves. Depending on how many hours they spent on making LP content, earning income from what some participants considered a part-time job was crucial for their continued participation. Julia, an LPer who started her career on the Something Awful forum in 2010

before moving away from it around 2014, described how she benefited from monetizing her content:

> Well, I think mainly it's - honestly, I think it's kept us going way longer than we would have otherwise because... Just becoming a parent and having a partner and a full time job and … just becoming an adult basically…I would've had no time at all for that, … if not for the money that was allowing or perhaps forcing me to make time for it.

This sentiment of 'forcing me to make time for it' was echoed in other interviews. Several participants reported feeling more obligated to keep to specific standards of quality for their content when they knew that they had a paying audience supporting them.

However, not all participants felt the same way about monetization. Participants who were active prior to the use of monetization systems, including some who were seen as early pioneers in LPs, held to the belief that LPs should remain a hobby, and not a job[8]. Tommy, one of the earliest LPers we were able to interview (started in 2007 and left at some point in 2015), had strong views on monetization, which he extended to streamers as well:

> I was against that always. I kind of fought hard against that, actually… I just didn't want money to get involved. I felt like our group was kind of big enough that it would be influential and if we started doing it, everyone else would start doing it. And I look at the state of LPs today and I'm just kind of disgusted by the way it's gone. Everything's completely monetized. Like you go on YouTube, there's a super chat icon, which is like a dollar sign. Or you go on Twitch and you buy a subscription or you throw bits and then it's like you're micro-transacting a bit of ... Whoever's doing the stream has to stop and

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[8] For context, the LP subforum started in 2007, while Patreon, one of the more reliable forms of monetization for LPers, was founded in 2013. The partnership program for Twitch.tv did not start until 2011. While ad revenue on YouTube had been in place since around 2008, it was not a reliable source of income for content creators until changes were made sometime around 2010-2012.

blurt out a catchphrase, because they got a subscription. I don't like the way it's gone at all, but now I'm thinking, okay now if it's gone all the way bad, maybe I should have taken the money.

This echoes a sentiment held by the subforum in the early years of its history: "Treat LPs as a hobby, not a job (GuidenYT, 2013)." While veterans among the community may view monetization as cheapening the medium, they don't necessarily look down on other LPers for using it. This is a further extension of serious leisure lifestyles, as they are, "members of a category of humankind who recognize themselves and, in some measure, are recognized by the larger community for their distinctive mode of life" (Stebbins, 2006, pg 454). While some LPers monetize their content, because they practice the same lifestyle as others in the SALP community, other members do not see them as outsiders. Orson, one of several moderators for the LP subforum we were able to interview (started making LPs in 2013, became moderator in 2017, currently still active), does not monetize his LP content, but doesn't look down on those that do:

Sure, getting paid for effectively a creative expression is good. And I do not begrudge anyone who does that themselves. I know a couple of people… they've got Patreons set up, they've got YouTube monetization on and whatnot. But for me, no, I've largely just decided I don't need that. My father used to say in his line of work… why he was so old school with the things he did, he basically said, "You know what? At the end of the day, basically I'm a dinosaur." And I think I've kind of inherited a bit of that philosophy too. Like at the end of the day when it comes to LPs in a lot of ways basically I'm a dinosaur, you know?

As can be seen from these responses, the SALP community's attitude towards financial extrinsic rewards varies, primarily based on each individual's relationship to LP. Those that devote time and resources equivalent to a traditional career, to making LPs, are more likely to see monetization as helpful to maintaining a standard of quality they are satisfied with. Nonetheless, the intrinsic and non-monetary rewards of making LPs are prioritized above that, and most would likely stop making them if the process ever stopped being enjoyable to participate in. For some of our participants, without these monetization systems available, they would be unable to create LPs and contribute to their identity as LPers. In fact, monetizing LP content allows other members to directly support LPers through financial means. Thus, the content creator receives both extrinsic and intrinsic rewards, knowing that the community of their peers is supporting their work and enhancing that sense of belonging to the community.

Beyond using monetization systems to earn an income from making LPs, there are several members of the community who have taken a different trajectory to making a career from LPs. By capitalizing on the skills they developed through making LPs, such as video/audio editing and performing as entertainers, a few LPers have been hired by game development studios. Some of our participants reported being hired as video editors or social streamers for different game studios. David, an LPer who has been active since 2008, was hired because of his LPs. During his interview with a game development studio he:

> was showing them a lot of bits of random streams I had done recently which … had the chat in line, in the video. So they could see the chat moving really fast. I was telling them, 'My stuff is a little more niche, but the people I have who watch our stuff are really into our stuff and very loyal.' And they liked that aspect a lot.

He was later hired to work on their social streams and video editing.

From this, we can see that extrinsic rewards do not have to come from monetizing LP content. Depending on the specific circumstances, LPers have found success through many different trajectories. Starting a career based on the skills they learn through making LPs is just one of their options and does not necessarily exclude them from establishing a social standing within the serious leisure community of SALP. Extrinsic financial rewards like this do not really factor into the decision to start making LPs, as our participants reported that finding careers like this were never part of their motivations to start. The extrinsic rewards that appear to be more highly valued come from recognition by peers, and can be seen when LPers develop a positive reputation within the SALP subforum. This can then feed into those financial returns, as the LPer will have a dedicated following and audience for their future work. David, who still works at that game studio and makes LPs to this day, also has an active Patreon for his LP content, and seems content to return to making LPs full-time should his career in video game development end.

Cultural Capital of Let's Plays

One of the factors that sets the Something Awful LP subforum apart from LPs on YouTube in general is their adherence to strict standards of quality. In terms of discussion groups/forums communities focused on LPs, there are not any others that match the Something Awful LP subforum in age or population. The subforum does not just provide a central location and database for LP threads, but also guides and resources for making LPs. Additionally, members of the subforum maintain image hosting and offsite archives specifically for LP threads, to preserve and maintain critical systems for making LPs. The top thread in the subforum contains the rules for posting LPs, which lay out what is and is not permissible to post. Most of the rules are simply reflections of the overall guidelines for the Something Awful forums (don't post anything illegal, for example), and are extensions of the subcultural identity

of Something Awful as a whole. The rules specific to LPs are interesting, especially considering that they have only changed after significant consideration from the LP community and serve as a significant factor in constructing the subcultural identity of the subforum.

One of the earlier rules was the 'Six Month' rule, which prohibited LPs of any game that was released in the last six months. The reasoning behind this was to avoid damaging the sales of newer games, as it was thought that potential buyers would watch an LP instead of buying the game for themselves. However, this fear of hurting game developers and having an undue influence on game development was, to some extent, unfounded, as members of the LP community seemed to be more likely to buy a game after watching an LP of it. Terry, another moderator (started making LPs in 2007, left the subforum sometime in 2014 by our estimates), talked about the reasoning behind the 'Six Month' rule:

> I was worried about it interfering with game developers and hurting sales. I feel like people would say, "Okay, well why play the game if I can just watch it online?" But what I've found in practice was actually the opposite. And my favorite example of this is I did a screenshot Let's Play of a game…[that] was absolutely awful. Everyone in the thread was laughing hysterically. It was completely a stupid game. And I sold 30 copies of it second hand. And just people posting in the thread, "I had to track this down and find it." This game was long gone. But I have never actually heard of any instance, with data behind it mind you, of anyone actually saying, "This hurts sales of our game."

This shows a certain tendency among the Something Awful LP community members to seek out games based on the LPs they watch, whether the games are good or bad. If nothing else, this suggests that the LP community was aware of what impact they might have had on game developers, which has been examined in more depth by Markocki in regard to indie developers

(2021). More importantly for our own research, this extended a shared sense of experience and also acted to maintain the cultural norms of the community. According to Thornton, many practices of subcultural communities are intended to differentiate what is considered niche versus mainstream (1995). This is true even for an online community like the Something Awful LP subforum, as there was considerable effort on their part to distance themselves from the celebrity LPers on YouTube, when YouTubers began to make names for themselves doing LPs.

When considering the cultural capital of the LP subforum, it is important to examine how the community transformed from the 'mainstream,' (as it was the original and only place to find LPs for a time) into the 'niche' or subculture (when LPs on YouTube grew in popularity and eclipsed the subforum). Thus, we can see the subforum as a reverse example of a subculture, where they did not start out by subverting or 'poaching' the cultural media they identified with, as Gelder noted in discussing Henry Jenkin's definition of fans and fandoms (Gelder, 2007; Jenkins, 1992). In fact, once the LP subforum was no longer seen as the primary location for LPs, and the genre had become more established on YouTube, the members of the LP community adopted new behaviors to distance themselves from these newcomers. This led to changes in how the community constructed their identity and sense of belonging, especially in the context of external LPers and newcomers to the subforum.

When newcomers to the LP subforum wanted to start their first LPs, they were advised to make a test post in one of the support threads[9], in order to get feedback from LP veterans. Newcomers were also free to ask questions about making LPs in these threads, on things like which editing/recording programs to use or what video codecs were appropriate for their game. However, this sometimes resulted in a form of gatekeeping, where established members of the

[9] The current thread for feedback is found here:
https://forums.somethingawful.com/showthread.php?threadid=3790126

community would challenge or discourage newcomers from participating. While it is hard to determine whether this discouragement was intentional, or the extent of the impact on newcomers, it did contribute to an image of elitism the subforum had. In the responses from our participants about this topic, a specific phrase came up again and again: Whenever a newcomer made it known they wanted to LP a game that had already been LPed before, someone would almost always confront them with, "What are you bringing to the table?" Alfonso, a LPer who started making LPs in 2014 and is still currently active, said that,

> If somebody comes in… and tried to LP [the same game as me], some people might say, 'Okay, well, what does your LP bring to the table that's different from the other LP that's already been done? What's changed that makes your LP worth doing?'

Often, in order to be allowed into the SALP community and participate, newcomers were expected to contribute something new, either by LPing a new game or playing an old game in a new way. They couldn't simply just record their gameplay and post it on the forum, they had to provide something additional through their commentary or style of gameplay, as explained by Martin (joined the subforum around 2007, left sometime around 2015), another of the subforum's early moderators:

> I remember back in the day when people were originally creating Let's Plays on Something Awful, we were basically very open about, "Hey, if you're literally just recording the game or just showing the game, that doesn't count. That's bullshit." That ended up being codified down the line as people just putting long plays on YouTube instead, which got ... Way back when, that would've been heresy. "No, you have to do something. You can't just record a thing. You have to at least be funny or have jokes or

insight or facts. You have to bring something to the table, presentation-wise." With

Something Awful, a lot of it is kind of, "Hey, what are you bringing interesting-wise?"

However, almost in direct contradiction with this was the sentiment from the general Something

Awful forums subculture against putting in *too* much effort. As Natasha, who started in 2008 and

left Something Awful a few years ago, said, "Because there's trying hard, and there's being a try

hard… Something Awful was very much in that weird limbo of, 'Don't try too hard, that means

you're stupid,' you know?" Essentially, in order to fit into the subcultural practices of the early

LP subforum, one had to put in just enough effort into their contributions to make them valuable,

but not too much effort, or they would be seen as posers. Thornton observed similar patterns of

behavior in U.K. club cultures, where teens trying to fit in would stick out for trying too hard to

adopt the practices of the subculture (1995).

The introduction of monetization systems also complicated the self-image of this

hobbyist community and the subcultural identity of the subforum. Since the prevailing sentiment

was that 'LPs should be treated as a hobby, not a job,' the notion of making money from them

was seen as 'selling out.' Another of our participants, Mark, who had an account for SA since

2003, started making LPs in 2011, and moved away from the Something Awful subforum around

2016, said:

> But at the time, there was almost like a negative connotation to monetizing your stuff
>
> because then you basically... It was akin to selling out… the people who weren't doing it
>
> for money were like, 'well, I'm doing it for the art of it because I just like doing it,' and
>
> that seen with more respect whereas other people were doing it for money just because
>
> they had the ability to make money off of those Let's Plays.

This view of LPers 'selling out' seemed to be associated mostly with YouTube celebrities, as another way to distinguish 'professional' and 'amateur' LPers. We use Nick Salvato's definitions of the two terms in our analysis, as they were originally written about YouTube content production (2009). As a way of cementing this distinction between amateur and professional LPs, another of the rules for the subforum prohibited 'shilling,' or requesting money for making LPs in the threads. This rule was enforced for most of the subforum's history, only having been relaxed in 2020. In the context of the SALP subculture, it served as a way of separating what was considered the mainstream from the niche, positioning LPers who made content without making money from it as higher producers of cultural capital than those that did. The fact that this rule was only recently lifted seems to indicate that the mainstream attitude towards monetization has started to influence the subforum, reflecting a gradual acceptance of the practice.

Another element of the SALP subculture that was designed to differentiate between the niche subculture of LPs was a sub-genre focused on denigrating LPers outside of the subforum. This subset of LPs on the subforum was originally created as a way of mocking early YouTube LPers, prior to LPs becoming popular there. Similar behaviour has been observed by other authors when examining subcultural communities, such as Hebdige studying youth subcultures in Britain in the 1980s (1979). Members of the Something Awful community would commentate on LP videos from YouTube, making fun of them and generally looking down on the quality of the content. This was a direct way in which the subforum distinguished itself in terms of cultural capital, positioning LPs from Something Awful above the early attempts made by external LPers. This served to reinforce the values of the subculture, by appealing to the ideals of the amateur nature of their practices, and denigrating those that were seen to be too mainstream or professionalized. It also served as a way to level legitimate criticism against YouTube LP

celebrities, such as by calling out YouTubers who made a name for themselves by filling their commentary with rape jokes. So, while the bulk of this sub-genre was intentionally mean-spirited and trolling, there did exist some unlikely benefits.

As time passed, the appeal of making fun of outsiders faded, and participants that had taken part in them expressed some regret about the practice. In reflecting on those early years of the subforum, our participants now view the whole thing as a form of bullying. Some participants reported that they had gone back and deleted their earliest LPs, as they were no longer comfortable with what they said and how they acted in them. Kai, an early (2007) LPer who has moved on to other pursuits (left SA sometime around 2014), said that there was some commentary in the first decade of their involvement they regretted:

That's why I've taken a decent number of those videos down because it's just like, this is not good. I don't want to spread this and I don't want people to get the idea that this is the person I still am.

Responses like this indicate a sense of growth and maturity, at least for the earliest members of the subforum. They seem to view the early years of LP as problematic and embarrassing. Whether this moment in the subforum's history is emblematic of the general cultural trends of Something Awful at the time, or unique to the SALP community specifically is hard to determine presently. Future research will look further into these aspects, along with other important periods in the historical context.

Conclusion

Our interviews with members of the Something Awful LP subforum demonstrate how the community formed and developed over time. Based on the concepts of serious leisure and cultural capital, we show that the main motivation for joining and participating in this community comes from intrinsic rewards, such as a shared sense of experience and finding an audience of receptive peers for one's efforts. These motivations can sometimes be contradicted by other behavioral elements in the community, as members try to distance themselves from what is considered 'mainstream' Let's Playing. This led to somewhat 'elitist' or gatekeeping practices, which, according to our participants, has disappeared from the subforum for the most part. Once the subforum had grown to a certain point, in terms of shared skills and standards of quality, the pressure on newcomers to contribute new and novel content was lessened. In other words, there was no longer a need for them to constantly justify their participation by answering the question of what they were 'bringing to the table'. Instead of creating a subcultural identity through excluding new members of the subforum, the current Something Awful LP community preserves their identity by providing resources and guides on how to create LPs, thereby maintaining a specific level of quality. While our findings are limited to the SALP community, future research can compare our conclusions when examining other LP communities. We have provided an in-depth historical case study analysis in this research as a source of comparative data for ongoing research into LP communities and content across social media and gaming platforms. Overall, the members of the SALP subforum have constructed a shared cultural identity that is still evolving, and now operates as a niche subculture vis-à-vis the cultural

dominance of YouTuber LPers, and this research has opened up new ways of looking at LPs through the lens of the subculture where they originated.

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Tables and Figures

Table 1: Pseudonyms used for participants and estimated period of activity on SALP

Pseudonym of Participant	Estimated Period of Activity on SALP
Abigail	2008 – 2016
Alfonso	2014 – Present
Anthony	2006 – 2016
Chantelle	2009 – 2015
Chris	2011 – Present
Daniel	2009 – Present
David	2008 – 2018
Drew	2011 – Present
Frederick	2010 – 2018
Gregory	2008 – 2018
Holly	2009 – 2019
Jackson	2008 – 2018
Jerry	2009 – Present
Julia	2010 – 2014
Kai	2007 – 2014
Liam	2014 – Present
Lucas	2007 – 2015

Mark	2011 – 2016
Martin	2007 – 2015
Natasha	2008 – 2017
Nathan	2006 – 2012
Neil	2008 – Present
Oliver	2007 – 2015
Orson	2013 – Present
Patrick	2019 – Present
Peter	2009 – 2014
Skip	2012 – 2019
Stanley	2011 – Present
Terry	2007 – 2014
Tommy	2007 – 2015
Trevor	2010 – Present
Vincent	2012 – Present
Walter	2007 – 2012
York	2006 – 2017