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“What Are You Bringing to the Table?”: The Phenomenon of Let’s Plays from the *Something Awful* Let’s Play Subforum

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Submitted in total fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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School of Computing and Information Systems

Faculty of Engineering and Information Technology

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Abstract

The phenomenon of Let's Play (recordings of gameplay with commentary from the player) is relatively new, having started around 2007. As the medium has developed over the years, the styles and genres of Let's Plays (or LPs) have grown, but the academic coverage of the phenomenon has not yet examined the historical context of its origins. While the main form of LPs in larger sites like YouTube has been covered by digital media scholars, the origins of LPs have seen less attention. The aim of this thesis is to provide a more detailed understanding of the LP phenomenon, by considering the historical context of LPs on the *Something Awful* LP subforum.

While the wider *Something Awful* forums has been recognized as the origin point for several internet memes and subcultures, its role in the evolution of Let's Play and similar forms of content is largely undocumented. This thesis, therefore, builds a knowledge foundation about the origins of Let's Plays, to serve as a basis for future comparison studies in the fields of Human Computer Interaction and Online Communities. Focusing on the *Something Awful* LP subforum, this thesis describes the historical context for the phenomenon, by identifying and analysing the three major components of the subforum community: the Let's Players themselves, the LP community they created, and the LPs as media artifacts.

This thesis examines the *Something Awful* Let's Play subforum and the LP phenomenon through three studies, each addressing a different element of the LP movement. The first study analyses a series of interviews conducted with 34 members of the subforum, applying concepts from serious leisure and cultural capital to understand their motivations for participating in the subforum. In the second study I apply quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection and analysis to look at the LP community. This study was designed to identify what aspects of an LP thread determined if it was highly engaged with by members of the subforum. In the third study, I address the Let's Plays themselves, selecting seven LPs to closely read through thematic analysis. This study was designed to provide a way to define and categorize different types of LPs, and understand the parts that were critical for each definition.

Through these studies, I demonstrate that the *Something Awful* LP Subforum has defined itself, intentionally or not, by considering what a Let's Play contributes as a gaming paratext.

The reasons for participating in making LPs stem from motivations related to sharing new experiences with peers, and behaviours then evolved to create a collective identity around them. By understanding this nature, this thesis serves as a foundational text for future studies, to allow scholars a comparison point for other online communities and forms of content. The similarities to other forms of online content suggest that these findings are applicable to studies into the fields of esports and streaming. Additionally, this work highlights how LPs can serve as a form of player feedback for game developers, and how communities like the SA LP subforum would serve as a valuable resource for them.

Declaration

This is to certify that

- This thesis is comprised of my original work towards the PhD except where indicated in the preface,
- Due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used,
- This thesis is less than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, the bibliography, and appendices.

[signed]

Brian McKitrick

Preface

This thesis contains both work that has been published elsewhere and work that has not been published outside of the thesis as outlined in the following table:

Published Work **Statement of contribution:** I led all stages of the research and writing process for each of these publications. I designed the studies, completed ethics applications (with approval and assistance from supervisors), conducted the research and conducted the analysis (in consultation with supervisors). I wrote draft versions of publications and Martin Gibbs, Bjørn Nansen, and Melissa Rogerson gave feedback on writing.				
Location in thesis	Title of work	Authors	Publication Outlet	Publication Status
Chapter 4	"What are you bringing to the table?": The *Something Awful* Let's Play Community as a Serious Leisure Subculture	McKitrick, B., Gibbs, M., Nansen, B., Rogerson, M., (2022)	Games and Culture, 18(3), 402-421	Published
Chapter 5	Let's Play *Something Awful*: A Historical Analysis of 14 Years of Threads	McKitrick, B., Gibbs, M., Nansen, B., Rogerson, M., Pierce, C., (2022)	Internet Histories, 7(2), 122-140	Published
Unpublished Work				
Chapter 6	Chapter 6: The Artifacts of Let's Play	McKitrick, B.	Unpublished work, not submitted for publication outside of the thesis.	

Data collection tools were created by Charlotte Pierce for the publication included in Chapter 5. This was provided as a co-authorship arrangement, but their contributions did not extend beyond providing the custom program used for data collection. Using the tool for data collection, analysis of that data, and writing the publication were my responsibility.

Acknowledgement of all sources of funding

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2019 - 2020 School of Computing and Information Systems, The University of Melbourne, funding for conference attendance and travel

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When I started my PhD in 2019, I could not have foreseen what it would entail. Throughout it all, I came to rely on the advice and guidance of my supervisors, not just as a graduate researcher, but as someone very far from home, living through a global pandemic. Dr. Martin Gibbs, Dr. Bjørn Nansen, and Dr. Melissa Rogerson have provided me with a wealth of expertise and knowledge, and I am so thankful to have had them as my advisors on this thesis.

I wouldn't have made it through years of lockdown without help from my friends and peers in the Human Computer Interaction group and owe a great deal to the conversations we've had about our various research topics. It is thanks to David Cumming, Fraser Allison, Lucy Sparrow, Madeleine Antonellos, Sophie Freeman, Matthew Sidji, Wei Zhao, Tom Byers, Jane Mavoa, and Nellie Seale that I was able to stay sane and refine my ideas through our discussions together. I could not have asked for a better cohort to work with.

I am thankful as always to my parents and siblings for all the patience they had when listening to me explain my research. Even if it didn't make complete sense, just being there to listen to me ramble on about it meant the world to me.

And to the members of the Let's Play Discord channel, who are too numerous to name individually here. The support and acceptance into the discussion channels was further encouragement I needed to pursue this research. I sincerely hope that this thesis is an interesting read for you all.

Table of Contents

Abstract 2
Declaration 4
Preface 5
Acknowledgement of all sources of funding 6
Acknowledgement 7
Table of Contents 8
List of Figures 11
List of Tables 11
Chapter 1: Introduction 12
Chapter 2: Background and Literature Review 16
2.1 What is Let's Play? 16
2.1.1 History of Let's Plays on *Something Awful* 18
2.1.2 Types of Let's Plays and Let's Players 23
2.1.3 LP Content for Understanding Other Concepts 26
2.1.4 Paratexts and Let's Plays 29
2.2 Who Makes Let's Plays? 30
2.2.1 Participatory Culture 30
2.2.2 Serious Leisure 31
2.2.3 Let's Play Producers 32
2.3 Let's Play Communities 35
2.3.1 Cultural Capital 36
2.3.1.1 Subcultural Capital ..... Error! Bookmark not defined.
2.3.2 Superparticipants and Online Communities 37
2.3.3 Descendants of Let's Play Communities 38
2.4 Literature Summary 40
Chapter 3: Methods 42
3.1 Research Design 42
3.1.1 The Abductive Research Strategy 42
3.1.2 The Ontology of the Idealist and the Epistemology of Constructionism 43
3.1.3 Adapting the Epistemology to the Research Design 44
3.2 Methodological Context for Data Collection and Generation 46
3.2.1 The People of Let's Play 47
3.2.1.1 Candidate Recruitment 47

3.2.1.2 The Interviews 49
3.2.1.3 Ethical Concerns 49
3.2.1.4 Thematic Analysis 50
3.2.2 The Community of Let's Play 51
3.2.2.1 Data Collection 51
3.2.2.2 Ethical Concerns 52
3.2.2.3 Analysis 52
3.2.3 The Let's Plays 53
3.2.3.1 Data Collection 53
3.2.3.2 Thread Selection 55
3.2.3.3 Thematic Coding and Analysis 56
3.2.3.4 Ethical Concerns 57
3.3 Conclusion and Reflections 57
Chapter 4: Interviews with Let's Players 59
4.1 Introduction 59
4.2 Prior Publication 59
4.3 How does this paper contribute to the thesis? 59
4.4 "What are you bringing to the Table?": The *Something Awful* Let's Play Community as a Serious Leisure Subculture 60
4.5 Connections to This Thesis 85
Chapter 5: The Community of Let's Play 87
5.1 Introduction 87
5.1.2 Collection Methods 87
5.2 Let's Play Something Awful: A Historical Analysis of 14 Years of Threads 88
5.3 Connections to This Thesis 114
Chapter 6: The Artifacts of Let's Play 116
6.1 Introduction 116
6.2 Methods 116
6.3 Initial Observations of the LPs 127
6.4 Observational Planning 130
6.5 Methods for Coding and Theme Generation 131
6.6 Generated Themes 131
6.7 Primary Genre: Informative 132
6.7.1 Technical Focus 132
6.7.2 Game Mastery 133
6.8 Primary Genre: Casual 133
6.8.1 Game Criticism 133

6.8.2 Schadenfreude 133
6.10 Primary Theme: Participatory 136
6.10.1 Ludic Participation 136
6.10.2 Creative Participation 137
6.11 Findings 138
6.11.1 LP Format 138
6.11.2 LP Commentary 139
6.11.3 Audience Participation 140
6.11.4 Contextualization 141
6.12 Conclusions 141
Chapter 7 Synthesis and Conclusion 143
7.1 Brief Summary 143
7.2 The Findings 143
7.3 How These Components Relate 145
7.3.1 Let's Play and Serious Leisure 146
7.3.2 Let's Play and Cultural Capital 148
7.3.3 Let's Plays as Paratexts 149
7.4 Limitations and Future Work 151
7.5 Conclusion 152
Bibliography 154
List of Games 170
Appendix 172
Appendix A: Current Rules for the Let's Play Subforum 172
Appendix B: Plain Language Statement given to participants interviewed in Chapter 4 176
Appendix C: List of Interview Questions used for the study in Chapter 4 180

List of Figures

Figure 1: Image from Bobvids on YouTube, ‘Stream Highlights of Tacoma,’ https://youtu.be/cWYyLM4-BuA?t=40. The overlaid face slides into frame from the Bit donation, and is a reference to a previous stream from Bobvids. 22
Figure 2: Still image from gif, showing the caption added by the LPer. Original gif sourced from https://lparchive.org/X-COM-UFO-Defense/Update%206/ 134
Figure 3: Images from The Terrible Secret of Animal Crossing, demonstrating how the LPer used systems in the game to create specific elements for their original story. Original images from https://lparchive.org/Animal-Crossing/Update%205/.....135

List of Tables

Figure 1: Image from Bobvids on YouTube, ‘Stream Highlights of Tacoma,’ https://youtu.be/cWYyLM4-BuA?t=40. The overlaid face slides into frame from the Bit donation, and is a reference to a previous stream from Bobvids. 22
Figure 2: Still image from gif, showing the caption added by the LPer. Original gif sourced from https://lparchive.org/X-COM-UFO-Defense/Update%206/ 134
Figure 3: Images from The Terrible Secret of Animal Crossing, demonstrating how the LPer used systems in the game to create specific elements for their original story. Original images from https://lparchive.org/Animal-Crossing/Update%205/.....135

Chapter 1: Introduction

I created my first Let's Play (LP) shortly after graduating from high school, during the summer break before moving away to college. There had been another LP of the game I had chosen, *Aquaria*, but it had been abandoned, and that served as motivation for me to finish mine. I only found out about the game from that abandoned LP, and I wouldn't have played it had I not read that thread. Whenever I wasn't working at my part-time job that summer, I was recording gameplay, editing in subtitles (I wasn't comfortable enough with my speaking voice to do vocal commentary), processing and uploading the videos. Even during my job, I was distracted by my thread, checking every day to see if anyone had posted in response to my videos. I finished my LP in about 3 weeks, and looking back on it, I can't help but see all the ways I could improve on it today. Eventually, I would return to the forums I had posted it in, not to make a new LP, but to better understand and examine the communities that create them.

A Let's Play is a recording of gameplay with commentary from the player (or players). While this definition is quite broad, this is intentional, as the variety of forms of LPs make it difficult to encompass all of them. The most common are video recordings of digital games, with voice commentary from the Let's Player. However, as I will show later in this thesis, there are LPs that use still images and text commentary, and LPs of non-video games, such as board games and choose-your-own-adventure books. Since the term was first used around 2005 (Klepek, 2015), Let's Plays have grown tremendously, in the number and size of audiences that watch them. Originating on the Games forums of *Something Awful* (a comedy site started in 1998, which has been the genesis of many internet memes and communities), LPs have gained popularity in more mainstream spaces, and are precursors for other related forms of game recording, distribution, and viewing, such as live streaming (Johnson and Woodcock, 2019).

Researchers have explored several areas related to LPs, such as literacy practices in LPs as paratexts (Burwell and Miller, 2016), comparisons between LPs and early film techniques (Glas, 2015), and the issues around fair use policies and LP content (Vogele, 2017). What this thesis intends to cover is understanding the origins and evolution of the genre. The fact that LP started on *Something Awful* is recognized by most authors (Kapriyelov, 2016; Glas, 2015; Kerttula, 2019), and so my focus is on the LPs posted on this subforum, and the community that grew up around them. My analysis of LPs covers this significant site, and

community as the origin of the phenomenon, tracing LP production, platforms, and participation from 2007-2020.

The aim of this work is to provide a better understanding of the motivations, community behaviours, and media practices that are found within the original LP community of *Something Awful* (SA), and how this informed the emergence of this important form of gaming-related entertainment. To this end, I constructed three primary research questions that guided the overall design of this thesis.

- What motivated the early LP producers on *Something Awful* to participate in their creation?
- What community behaviours and practices define the SA LP community, and how have they changed over time?
- What are the key components that define and characterize LP content and its development on *Something Awful*?

This thesis does not intend to examine the larger LP genre outside of the SA LP Subforum, but rather to focus on LP content, creation, and community within this significant context, that predated the development of various types of game creations, entertainment, and paratextual play, in order to give a comparison point for future work. By understanding the context from which LPs came from, we provide clarity for examining other forms of online content, with LPs as a comparison point for live-streaming systems, for example.

This research supplements and expands upon previous literature on LPs. It is intended for future scholars to use as a starting comparison point for other online creative media communities and practices. As LPs predate streaming communities, understanding the origins of LP will provide a significant foundation for further research into the streaming phenomenon. Additionally, this work also shows how LP communities can benefit the game design industry, as LP threads can serve as valuable sources of player feedback.

In chapter 2, I will go over the literature I used as a foundation for my findings. Notably, the order in which I discuss the components of the LP subforum is different in chapter 2, compared to the rest of the thesis. To make it easier to understand the concepts discussed, I start by explaining the Let's Play artifacts, before moving on to the Let's Players and Let's Play community. In the rest of the thesis, namely chapters 4 through 6, these are organized by when the studies were conducted: Chapter 4 is on the Let's Players, Chapter 5 features the LP community, and then Chapter 6 looks at the LP artifacts.

Before getting into Let's Plays themselves, in chapter 2 I will also provide a brief history of the SA LP subforum, as a primer for more in depth discussions in later chapters. I examine previous texts and studies that used LPs, either as a means to understand a related concept or to understand LPs themselves. In order to examine my findings, I provide a summary of important concepts from texts covering serious leisure, cultural capital, and forms of online participation. These concepts are crucial to understanding later chapters, where Chapter 4 demonstrates the ways in which the SA LP subforum operates as a serious leisure community, and Chapter 5 examines how and why the community members engage with certain LP threads, based on who made the thread and the type of content it provides.

In chapter 3, I will be going over the methods and methodology I used throughout this thesis. I will cover the research framework, ontological and epistemological assumptions, and how they relate to my research goals.

Chapter 4 addresses the topic of the Let's Players, and what their motivations were for joining the SA LP subforum. The chapter presents a previously published study I conducted in early 2020, where I interviewed several members of the subforum, both currently active ones and those who left after their time making LPs there. I describe their perspectives in terms of serious leisure community practices, and how the intrinsic rewards for participation provide the motivation to take part in making LP content.

Chapter 5 also presents a previously published paper I wrote from a study of the community of LP. I collected and analysed data from thousands of threads from the subforum, examining them to see what kinds of threads drew the most engagement from the subforum members. This study originally looked to see if there was a minority group of LPers that dictated the styles of LPs that were considered popular, but the findings indicate that it is the content of an LP thread that determines what is valued most highly by the community.

Chapter 6 covers the third study, which was planned to be written up as a chapter from the start. It takes a closer look at the LPs themselves, examining the different types of LPs and the key features that define them. The different genres and methods for making LPs provides a way to understand LPs as media artifacts, and through thematic analysis, I demonstrate the critical features of various LPs.

Chapter 7 synthesizes the findings from the three studies and the significance of them, discussing how they relate to the main research goals and previous literature. In brief, from the research I have done on the LP subforum, there are insights into how it functions as a

modern-day form of serious leisure, the role that cultural capital plays in online communities similar to the subforum, and the ways in which video game paratexts can grow beyond the original game as text. Underpinning much of these findings was a phrase that came up during the previous interviews, that represents several different facets of LPs in relation to these foundational texts and concepts: “What are you bringing to the table?” In this final chapter, I show how this question serves as a central idea within my findings, and how that reflects on the original ideas I utilized as a knowledge basis for the thesis.

Chapter 2: Background and Literature Review

In this chapter, I will detail the major topics and concepts used throughout my thesis. To start with, I will give the definition of Let's Play, before summarizing the history and general evolution of the *Something Awful* LP subforum. Throughout this process, I will cover the key texts I used as foundations for the studies I conducted and the analysis in the rest of my research, as they relate to the definitions of Let's Plays and the concepts I apply, such as serious leisure, cultural capital, and participation in online communities.

I have divided this chapter into three main sections, each organized around one of the main subjects of my research. In section 2.1, I go over a brief history of Let's Play on *Something Awful*, to lay the historical context for later discussions, as well as provide a definition of Let's Play based on previous work. This section is designed to connect the media artifact of Let's Play to literature on paratexts, and how I use this view of LP as paratext to examine them in further detail later in the thesis.

In section 2.2, I cover literature and concepts related to the Let's Players, the individuals that make Let's Play content. I start with the broader field of participatory culture, before focusing on serious leisure communities. As the LP subforum possesses many of the traits that define serious leisure, I demonstrate how these concepts can be used to understand the individual motivations and behaviours of Let's Players.

In section 2.3, I address the literature I drew from when examining the Let's Play community as a whole. Starting with ideas from cultural and subcultural capital texts and authors, I draw comparisons to online communities like the LP subforum, and how they can be useful in analysing them. I finish this section, and the chapter overall, by discussing some of the other forms of online practices that resemble Let's Plays, like communities engaged in streaming and esports. This is done primarily to make a distinction between the LP community I researched, and the similarities it has to descendent or contemporary groups that produce similar gaming content.

2.1 What is Let's Play?

In this section, I will provide a brief history of how Let's Play came to be on the *Something Awful* forums, starting with the early foundation of the subforum in 2007. This will go over the definition of Let's Play used by other authors, before I demonstrate the historical context

from which I planned much of my research in the rest of this thesis, as it is an important factor in understanding not just the modern form of Let's Play, but communities and practices informed by it. This includes streaming and speed-running practices, which still share many elements in common with Let's Plays. With this context established, I will be better able to examine each of the major facets that comprise the focus of my study, which I will detail in later sections in this chapter.

Answering the question of "What is Let's Play?" is my attempt to solve a specific problem I have found in regards to Let's Play communities and academia. To date, a number of authors have defined LP by whichever specific field they were working in, which means that no single definition can really apply to LP in general. By developing a definition based on the people and behaviours that create Let's Play communities, I will synthesize these past efforts with my own findings on this community, so that the LP subforum can be compared in more meaningful ways to other spaces online. A definition which can be used in multiple areas of research, such as digital media, network theory, and concepts around gender identities in online spaces.

The definitions used by authors vary somewhat, though several common elements appear throughout. Kapriyelov defines them as "documented records of a videogame playthrough which feature one or more players, and are often accompanied by commentaries" (Kaprieylov, 2016, 4). This definition aligns closely with my own, and applies to the different forms of LP, though does not include non-videogames (board games, choose-your-own-adventure books, etc.). Kerttula goes a bit further, by dividing a Let's Play into specific parts: "The main thing is the gameplay, either as a video or as still images. Second thing is the player-narrator, the individual or individuals playing the game. Third part is the story the player-narrator tells, the story about playing a video game" (Kerttula, 2019, 90). Here, we see a definition that considers the role of the Let's Player as a key component of an LP, as they serve as a both a narrator for their own actions and a voice for how the player feels about the game. Kerttula's explanation of this player-narrator role focuses on instances where "the narrator creates a fictional character in the game (2019, 90)," which is not present in other authors' definitions. Within the LPs reviewed for this thesis, however, there are examples I use later on that do represent this form of character narrator. It essentially serves a more prominent purpose in the narrative style of Let's Play, which I cover in greater detail in Chapter 6.

The definition of Let's Play from Burwell and Miller also takes into account the intent of the Let's Player, as a factor in how to understand their production. They describe LP as a hybrid of game and video, which "vary in length, content and technical sophistication, but they almost always have two shared features: gameplay footage; accompanied with simultaneous commentary provided by the gamer" (Burwell and Miller, 2016, 110). This definition doesn't consider non-video LPs, but the inclusion of technical sophistication as a trait to differentiate LPs is a worthwhile addition. To expand on this, the format of an LP can vary based on the level of technical skill or the preferred style of presentation of the Let's Player. Some Let's Players use subtitled commentary instead of audio, or use screenshots with text commentary, for LPs that don't use video recordings. Burwell and Miller also consider the intent behind making an LP as an important aspect to examine, as Let's Players "may set out to promote, review, critique or satirize a game…display their skills, participate in a community, or make a profit" (2019, 110). This goes more into the motivations Let's Players have when starting to make Let's Plays. As a secondary benefit, the motivation to review and critique a game can create LPs that serve as player feedback for game developers, acting as direct insight into how a player feels about a game. For my own definition of Let's Play, while I omit the inclusion of this intent from the Let's Player as a determining aspect, I still consider it to be an Important factor in understanding them. Their motivation, in my view, is not necessary to determine whether something is a Let's Play or not, but important for more in depth analysis of a Let's Play.

2.1.1 History of Let's Plays on *Something Awful*

The *Something Awful* Let's Play subforum, which is organized under the larger Games forum, has been active since early 2007. However, it is a matter of debate as to what exactly can be considered the first LP. According to Patrick Klepek, the term 'let us play' came from a 2005 Something Awful thread on *The Oregon Trail*, though the thread in question has been lost in the archives (Klepek, 2015). In this context, 'Let's Play' is meant to invite the audience to share in the experience of playing a video game by watching someone else play it for them.

Regardless, the first LP threads were posted in the main Games forum of *Something Awful*, until there were enough of them to necessitate a new subforum to house them. Not long afterwards, the *Let's Play Archive* was established by forums member 'From Earth', as a way to preserve completed LPs outside of the regular SA archival system (*Lparchive.org*, 2007). Normally, in order to read older threads on SA, you would need to have an upgraded forums

account, which costs an additional $10. Thus, the offsite *LP Archive* provided a way for people to access older LPs for free, including those who did not have a forums account in the first place.

Additionally, through a partnership with the Internet Archive in 2009, it became possible to rehost older Let's Play videos that would otherwise be lost (*Lparchive.org*, 2007). This is significant as, prior to 2010, most LPers avoided posting videos to YouTube, due to the limitations on video length and quality on it. The SA forums does not host videos, so LP threads have to link to video hosting sites for their content. Prior to changes to YouTube in late 2010, videos were limited to 10 minutes in length, as well as poorer video quality overall. Instead, Let's Play videos were hosted on a variety of different services, most of which have since gone defunct or no longer allow Let's Play content. Sites like Vimeo, Viddler, Blip.tv, Google Video (prior to the acquisition of YouTube), and Dailymotion were common choices for Let's Players who did not have the ability to host their own content. Since most of these are now gone, only videos that were on YouTube at that time survived, so the Internet Archive partnership means that older LPs are not completely lost forever.

With the foundation of the new subforum, there also came new rules for Let's Plays. These rules have always been present on the subforum, enforceable with temporary probations for minor infractions and semi-permanent bans for major ones. Most of the rules were extensions of the posting guidelines for the main forums, such as 'Don't post Let's Plays with pornographic or illegal content,' or 'Only make posts that contribute to the conversation in a meaningful way.' One rule that was specific for Let's Play was commonly referred to as the "Six Month Rule," which prohibited Let's Plays of any games that had been released within the previous six months. This was in place to discourage Let's Plays of newer games, in order to allow people the chance to buy and experience the game themselves, rather than just watching a Let's Play instead. This restriction was eventually shortened to three months, then removed entirely. The current rules for posting on the subforum (edited for brevity here, the full rules can be found in Appendix A) are as follows:

> **Rules for Posting In LP:**
>
> 1. **LP Threads only, please!**
>
> …
>
> 2. **Keep the General SA Forum Rules in mind!**
>
> If you take away only one thing from them, make it this thing: Before replying, please ask yourself the following question: **"Does my reply offer any significant advice or help contribute to the conversation in**

any fashion?" If you can answer "yes" to this, then please reply. If you cannot, then refrain from replying.

3. **Play nice, don't be a dick!**
4. **Report shitheads!**
   This cannot be stressed enough. LP threads aren't trivial to follow, and no amount of mods can follow them all. **We probably won't see bad posts if they're not reported!** …
5. **Respect spoiler rules!**

Rules for Posting LPs:

1. **Above all else, show us you give a damn!**
2. **No YouTube dumps or reposts!**
3. **Don't shill for donations!**
4. **Please note the following rules on adult content!**

… (Fedule, 2017).

Part of the reason why asking for money for making Let's Plays is discouraged is due to the general motivations behind LPs on the *Something Awful* forums. From the earliest days of LP, the consensus among members on the subforum was that LPs should be treated as hobbies: if it feels like work or it isn't enjoyable for the Let's Player, they should stop forcing themselves to do it. In other words, people should make LPs only if they enjoy making them. Until newer systems of monetization became available, LPs on *Something Awful* were treated as a hobby, and not seriously discussed as a potential source of income. I will come back to this detail in Chapter 4, when I talk to members of the subforum and discussed their opinions and attitudes about monetizing their LP content.

The addition of monetization to YouTube for creators in 2008 transformed the possibilities for making money off of creative content like LPs and led to changing attitudes on the SA LP subforum towards monetization. While some popular channels on YouTube were able to capitalize on this opportunity and generate thousands of dollars per minute of LPs through ad revenue and merchandising deals (Petey Vid Blog, 2019), most of the Let's Players on *Something Awful* avoided the methods by which mainstream YouTubers came about this success. Only a few channels on YouTube, even today, are able to earn such an income from Let's Play videos, and their success is mainly reliant on the personality of the player as the focus, rather than any effort in their style of commentary about the game. It is more the performative ability of the LPer, in those instances, that drives greater levels of success. While the patterns of behaviours and approaches to making LP content are different between SA and mainstream YouTube, it is important to have the historical context to better understand them. SA LP developed separately from YouTube, at least prior to 2010. We can

see this in the variety of different video hosts that were used for LP content from 2007 to 2010, and as a result, the style and types of LPs developed in semi-isolation from the early content practices of YouTube at that time. Later, as YouTube's systems become more accommodating for LP content, along with changes to how videos could be monetized, the mainstream style of LP came into their own. Understanding how the SA form of LP grew alongside the YouTube form is one of the main goals of this research, as learning how SA LP came to be in the historical context will give insight into how LP on YouTube became the modern form.

Today, there are a few more methods for making money through Let's Plays other than YouTube ad revenue and merchandising/marketing partnerships. Some Let's Players use Patreon, which is a service that allows for the audience of a content creator to give regular monetary support, in exchange for additional content exclusive to the people who give money. Oftentimes, a Let's Player will allow their Patreon supporters to access the next update video in advance, usually a week before they post it publicly. Other common rewards include thanking donors by name at the end of each video, access to donor only live streams, and custom merchandise like buttons and shirts sent to donors.

Another source of revenue available to Let's Players is streaming subscription services. Streaming systems are sites that allow one to put on live broadcast of themselves playing games. Streaming sites like Twitch.tv and Hitbox provide viewers chat windows to comment on the live feed, talk to one another, and even interact directly with the streamer. Subscribing to a streamer's channel also gives rewards to the audience, as well as a monetary payout to the streamer from the platform. These rewards can be custom emojis that can be used in the live chat, access to subscriber only chat channels, or the ability to vote on what game the streamer will play next. Additionally, if a viewer does not wish to commit to a regular monthly payment, they can give one-time tips to the streamer, such as through Twitch's 'Bits', a digital currency used to support Twitch streamers. As new systems of monetization and streaming have developed, Let's Players and streamers alike have adapted their content to incorporate these platform features, though not every LPer or streamer will make use of them.

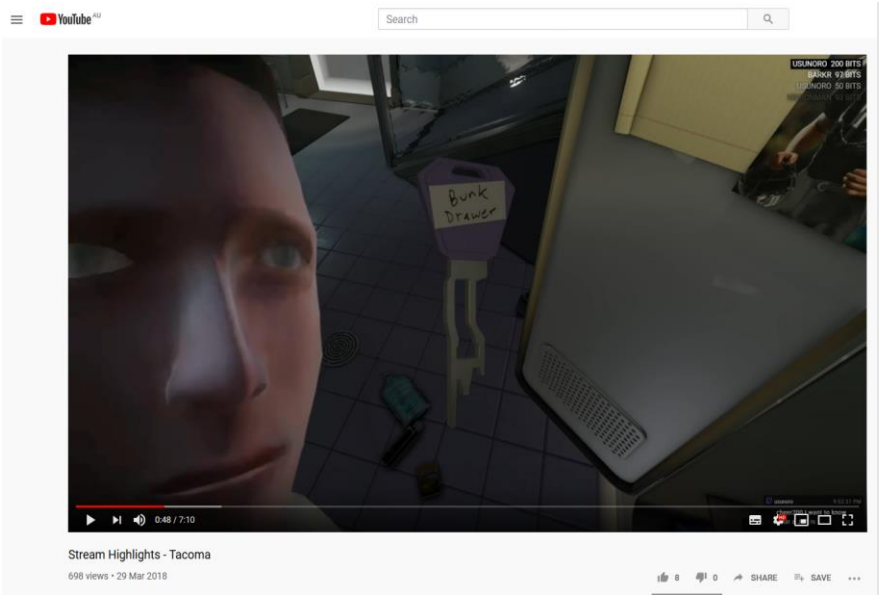


Figure 1: Image from Bobvids on YouTube, 'Stream Highlights of Tacoma,' *https://yout*u.be/cWYyLM4-BuA?t=40. The overlaid face slides into frame from the Bit donation, and is a reference to a previous stream from Bobvids.

As Let's Plays have evolved, different styles have emerged, which can be first categorized based on the type of commentary of the Let's Player. For video LPs, commentary is either recorded live (at the same time as gameplay) or post (gameplay is recorded first, then the Let's Player goes back later to record their commentary over it). This does not apply to screenshot LPs, as all commentary is made after gameplay. LPs can then be further segmented based on the kind of commentary made, such as if it is intended to be informative about the game or purely humorous and entertaining. The informative style of LP is demonstrated well by the LP of *Jurassic Park: Trespasser* (DreamWorks Interactive, 1998) by forums user 'Research Indicates,' where he talked about how the game related to the original franchise, splicing in movie clips where relevant in the game (Research Indicates, 2008). It is a little more difficult to present a 'typical' humorous LP, since humour is inherently subjective and depends on an individual's preferences. Nonetheless, I would argue that the LP of *Saint's Row 2* (Volition, 2008) by 'Kaubocks' and 'Panzer' is suitable, as they play co-operatively through a modded version of the game, leading to bizarre situations throughout (Kaubocks and Panzer, 2014). For example, one of the changes they made through the mod was to add drivable train cars to the game world, without making sure the physics of the game could handle them, leading to humous sequences of game play featuring very bouncy trains.

Screenshot Let's Plays can be categorized differently than video, based on how the game is presented to the audience. Some screenshot LPs invite the audience to participate by voting on major decisions in the game, such as an LP of *Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri* by 'nweismuller,' where members of the forum acted as fictional policy makers in the narrative of the game (nsweismuller, 2015). Other screenshot LPs go beyond simply transcribing the events of the game and completely replace the narrative with their own. An early example of this was an LP of *Animal Crossing* by 'Chewbot,' which in 2007 crafted a dark horror focused story inside a game known for its light-heartedness and being cute (Chewbot, 2007). I go into greater depth about the different types and formats of LPs in Chapter 6.

2.1.2 Types of Let's Plays and Let's Players

Let's Plays are generally categorized by the play style, level of experience, and overall intentions of the person making them, which is seen in the terms used by academic authors and the Let's Play community itself. The *Let's Play Archive* (2007) provides tags for each LP it hosts, which indicate the method of recording used in the LP (video with subtitles or voice commentary, screenshots with text commentary, or a hybrid of screenshots and video), the style of commentary from the player (humorous, informative, or narrative), and other important aspects used to differentiate them (co-operative play, multiple commentators/players, thread challenges, or narrative replacements). Hale uses similar terms, with blind, semi-blind, experienced, and expert used to describe the players' expertise, and casual, purist, 100% run, expert run, and challenge run used for the types of playthrough (Hale, 2013, 6-8). These terms often indicate what intentions the LPer had when the LP in the first place, which comes up more during the interviews with members of the subforum in Chapter 5.

Part of my goal to construct a more comprehensive definition comes from the literature reviewed for this research, specifically those texts written on Let's Plays. Many of them approach the subject from a social media studies perspective, pulling on varied concepts related to online culture. This leads to many of them focusing mostly on the YouTube LP communities, since oftentimes the focus of social media studies is YouTube influencers. For example, Catherine Burwell writes about how Let's Plays "function as sites of new literacies" through their "emphasis on processes of meaning-making within games; and their mobilization of literacies associated with remix and appropriation" (C. Burwell, 2017). This understanding of Let's Plays as paratexts is not unique to Burwell. Viewing Let's Plays in

this way allows us to examine how members of a community share experiences, which can be analysed to see how those shared experiences shape the community as a whole.

Separating Let's Players into categories comes up often in the existing literature. Kris Ligman, writing for Popmatters in a four-part series, divides Let's Players into the Expert, Chronicler, Comedian, and Counter-Histographer types (Ligman, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c, 2011d). Ligman provides examples from the *Something Awful* LP community for each of the different types, initially comparing the types to those found in *Pokemon*. Expert types demonstrate their mastery of the game being played, Chroniclers seek to document the entirety of a game, Comedians endeavour to entertain their audience, and Counter-Historiographers create new meanings within games (Ligman, 2011b). There is a great deal of overlapping between the types, making it very unlikely that a Let's Player will demonstrate only one type of behaviour or kind of LP in their career. Due to the age of these texts, the lack of worry about corporate or financial meddling in Let's Plays (Ligman, 2011d) is interesting, considering how much money celebrity Let's Players make through YouTube today.

Daniel Recktenwald, in his Master's Thesis titled *Interactional Practices in Let's Play Videos* (2014), follows a similar set of ideas as Ligman when studying Let's Plays. His main argument relies on the interaction between the Let's Player, the game being played, and the YouTube audience. In fact, many of the existing papers written about LPs give a great deal of importance to the YouTube centred communities, and only briefly mention the original LP community on the *Something Awful* forums (Burwell and Miller, 2016; Kapriyelov, 2016; Hale, 2013). This is a notable absence in the literature, which is addressed in this thesis. My research intends to examine these texts within the context of the original *Something Awful* Let's Play subforum. In Chapter 7, I also describe my own ways of organizing and categorizing Let's Plays, primarily to highlight the aspects of LPs that are critical to understanding them.

Thomas Hale's 2013 work is, as of this writing, the only text that attempts to document the history of the *Something Awful* Let's Play subforum, giving a summary of the foundation of the community (Hale, 2013). In regards to using LPs for archiving video games, Hale argues that "a good Let's Play captures the most important aspects of a game: the technical details (graphics and sound, cinematics) coupled with the player's own anecdotal experience of gameplay" (2013, 12). Furthermore, the archive of completed Let's Play projects, maintained

by volunteer efforts from the subforum, means that "we are also allowed a 'time capsule'-style snapshot of fan opinions and discussion of the game itself" (2013, 14). This is critical to understand in terms of researching Let's Play communities, as having access to this context is vital to examining the behaviours of the community members. In Chapter 6 I provide more detailed examples of how LP threads can act as such 'time capsules,' and how they can shed insight into what types of LPs were popular at different times in the subforum's history.

Hale even touches on the reasons why members of the forums participated in the creation of Let's Plays during the early years of the phenomenon:

> Indeed, the concept of LP in general is rooted in the social and the desire to share experiences. In the early days of LP and the Let's Play subforum, the atmosphere was lax relative to the level of moderation and encouragement of critique we see today. The vast majority of early LPs were casual affairs, with minimal editing and several gameplay or commentary mistakes left intact… Particularly in these early days, many of the games chosen by LPers were older releases, particularly spanning from the late 80s to early '90s – the reasons for this are twofold: first, these titles were already widely available in emulated format, and thus easy to acquire and record footage of; second is the nostalgic value. (Hale, 2013, 22)

Hale also incorporates many ideas of participatory culture from Henry Jenkins, providing examples from the *Something Awful* Let's Play forums to show the concepts in action. For example, during the *Sonic 2006* Let's Play by user Pokecapn and his friends (Pokecapn, 2008), the Let's Players presented various challenges to members in the thread. Hale uses this to show how Let's Plays can engage in intertextuality within participatory culture, by "drawing the audience in to participate in gameplay of their own" (Hale, 2013, 28).

Overall, Hale's work is a good summary of the state of the *Something Awful* Let's Play community in 2013, although, as Hale notes, such broad coverage meant that it was not possible to go into any great depth on any particular aspect (Hale, 2013). In order to describe the context in which this community formed and developed, this thesis will take into consideration the historical context of the subforums as an influence on how LPs and their associated practices developed. More specifically, those ideas of participatory culture will be central in Chapter 4, where I discuss the motivations provided by members of the subforum for why they took part in LP.

2.1.3 Let's Play Content and Paratexts

Authors have previously used Let's Plays to examine other topics related to gaming practices and game design. From these texts, we can see that LPs provide a valuable opportunity for scholars who understand them. In this section, I will go over some of the notable instances of these texts, and how they relate to LPs as a media form. As an example, the concept of ludonarrative dissonance is discussed in *Ludonarrative Hermeneutics: A Way Out and the Narrative Paradox* (Roth et al, 2018), looking at the way in which gameplay elements conflict with narrative elements in a video game. The authors found that Let's Plays proved useful in understanding the responses players had to unsatisfying narrative designs. Even though the reactions of players in Let's Plays are a type of performance, they contend, "that the performativity here allows us *more* insight, not less, into the ways in which players respond to the tensions arising out of the particular combination of gameplay and narrative" (Roth et al, 2018, 100, emphasis in original). They conclude that utilizing Let's Plays in further research methods is warranted, at least for evaluating the interactive narrative user experience.

Narrative design in games and Let's Plays is a fertile subject for authors to write on. In Tero Kerttula's "*What an Eccentric Performance": Storytelling in Online Let's Plays* (Kerttula, 2019), the author conducts a narrative analysis of two Let's Plays of the same game, with each Let's Play created by different players in different styles. Kerttula argues that, since watching a Let's Play of a game essentially removes the interactive component of the experience, Let's Players construct the narrative of the player, rather than of the game itself, through narrativization (2019, 241). Kerttula goes on to describe the process by which they analysed the two Let's Plays, and the categories they observed in the narration from the players, coming up with the seven categories of descriptive narration, story narration, audiovisual narration, game mechanics narration, intertextuality, reflective narration, and alternative narration (2019, 242). Of particular note is 'reflective narration,' wherein the Let's Player narrates on conversations or comments from viewers, such as when they give hints to a puzzle the Let's Player was having trouble with (2019, 247). However, Kerttula believes that reflective narration is rare, as

> Many LPs, especially of shorter games, are posted as single, standalone works. This does not leave room for the audience to provide tips to the player. In the written LP, the commentary from the audience is absent because the whole text was put up on the

> site at one time. In addition, even though there is an option to comment, no comments have to date been made (Kerttula, 2019, 248).

The Let's Plays that Kerttula was examining were not from the *Something Awful* Let's Play forums, which might explain why they came to this conclusion. However, the existence of hundreds of active threads on the forums, with ongoing conversations between Let's Players and their audience, shows that interactions between the two parties is much more common on *Something Awful*.

To illustrate this, we can find representatives for Kerttula's types of narration in Let's Plays from *Something Awful*. A good demonstration of game-mechanics narration, which "comments on the gaming elements of the subject in question," (2019, 246) is found in the 100% Let's Play of *Darksiders II* (Vigil Games, 2012) by forums members Edo Animus and Guard Mom Heart (Edo Animus and Guard Mom Heart, 2015). Throughout the Let's Play, Edo Animus, who is the one playing and recording, makes use of various bugs and exploits to demonstrate his mastery of the game. The game-mechanics narration is represented by the multiple times he describes how to go outside of the game map, permanently increase in-game stats through bugs, and use the systems of the game to create custom weapons that make light of the hardest difficulty setting in the game.

For intertextuality, which "connects the game mechanics, visuals, and story to other forms of popular culture, such as movies, music, and other video games," (Kertulla, 2019, 246) a good example is found in the Let's Play of *Deadly Premonition* (Access Games, 2010-2013) by supergreatfriend (supergreatfriend, 2011). In the game, the main character Francis York Morgan spends a lot of time driving around the setting of the game, during which he has one-sided conversations with a mysterious, unseen Zach about various topics. These include discussions about cult horror movies and Francis' thoughts about them. In the LP, supergreatfriend goes one step further and supplements these discussions with his own thoughts on the movies, editing in clips from them in order to make the long driving sections more interesting for his audience. While knowledge about movies like *Attack of the Killer Tomatoes* is not necessary to play or understand the game, the intertextuality from the Let's Player's reviews of movies discussed by the game create additional narrative elements in the Let's Play. Thus, a very different experience of the game is created by the Let's Play incorporating external texts in the narration.

Kerttula's category of reflective narration, which view Let's Plays as compared to vlogging on YouTube (2019, 247), takes on new meaning when applied to the *Something Awful* forums threads. Because the Let's Plays on *Something Awful* are contained within discussion threads, there is a great deal of conversation between Let's Players and their audiences. In fact, there are Let's Plays that invite the audience members to participate in the production, allowing them to vote on gameplay decisions or naming characters in the game after themselves. *Dwarf Fortress* (Adams and Adams, 2006) has had several Let's Plays on *Something Awful*, most of which are succession Let's Plays. A succession Let's Play is where one player plays the game for one in-game year, taking screenshots and documenting the events of the fortress during their rule. They then hand the save file to the next player in succession, who then takes over for a turn, and so on, and so on. The game allows the player to rename the dwarves, which means that forums members who are not playing as the 'Overseer' at that moment, often request a dwarf named after them. Some even go so far as to write journals from the perspective of their dwarf, contributing to the narrative of the Let's Play as a whole.

Another author that focuses on Let's Plays on YouTube is Josef Nguyen, in *Performing as Video Game Players in Let's Plays* (Nguyen, 2016). In it, Nguyen posits that the performance elements of Let's Players are more authentic when they are live and unscripted. While this may be true for the YouTube celebrity Let's Players he references throughout, his focus on live commentary and riffing does not account for Let's Plays with commentary made in post (Nguyen, 2016). The idea that the identity of the Let's Player is a performance that engages with video games in new and interesting ways is still valid, but the fact that there are Let's Players who are more meticulous about their performative identities (through editing and careful monitoring of the content they produce) should provide a different perspective on the issue.

As stated before, the myriad of approaches to studying Let's Plays is also reflected in how scholars use them for interpreting other concepts. Sari Piittinen, in *Morality in Let's Play Narrations*, examines the ways in which digital games use Gothic traditions to create complex moral dilemmas for players (Piittinen, 2018). Building off of Kerttula, Piittinen argues that morality can be used in a similar way to narrative elements by the LPers to "formulate and present their play-specific morality, and hence, the moral of their story, to their audience" (Piittinen, 2018, 4672). They also note that previous work on ethics and values in games has not used Let's Plays in their methods, a gap they address in the study.

Piittinen also utilizes Nguyen's work, showing how "LPers are treated here not only as recipients of stories, but also as actively involved in producing narrative meanings through their actions and commentaries" (Piittinen, 2018, 4674). Even though the performance of the Let's Player may be pre-planned, and thus less authentic, the "potential performative intentionality does not diminish the importance of morality in LP commentaries – it may even underline it, if players consider it a feature that can enrich their narratives and provide a way to connect with their audience" (2018, 4674). Though it may be difficult to prove if every LPer on YouTube is conscious of this aspect of their performance, understanding how they might exaggerate certain moral elements in their constructed narratives is useful for games scholars to examine it.

Originally, paratext referred to those parts of a book that accompany the main text and yet still exist outside of it, as thoroughly explored and described by Gerard Genette (1997), such as the foreword, appendices, jacket cover, and other similar elements. Paratexts are "texts or artifacts that surround a central text, lending that central text meaning, framing, and shaping how we understand it" (Consalvo, 2017), and is one of the analytical lenses that Let's Plays can be viewed through. In this view, the central text is the video game being played, and the LP is a paratext of that game. The view of LP as paratexts is not new, as other authors have examined them through this lens before, and it is useful for understanding the LP phenomenon to review their work. As part of my research design comes from my background in game studies, applying ideas about paratexts is useful, as they are often utilized in that field of study.

Katarzyna Marak, in their contribution to *Paratextualizing Games: Investigations on the Paraphernalia and Peripheries of Play* (Beil et al, 2021), looks at Let's Plays as a way for games scholars to examine the experience of playing a game. Let's Plays as paratext, Marak writes, "can supply the scholar with extensive data which might not be apparent to them during their own critical playthrough, thus reducing the likelihood of potential blind spots in the subsequent analysis" (2021, 214). LPs can, essentially, provide researchers a way to understand a game in addition to their own personal playthroughs. A researcher may have difficulty objectively analysing a game based on their own experience with it, but can view an LP as a filter of sorts, by examining how others have gone through the same game: "Combining one's own personal critical playthrough with multiple Let's Plays of one game benefits any close reading of a digital game text by providing multiple additional perspectives" (Marak, 2021, 217). In this way, LP paratexts serve a valuable function for

scholars, as a way to examine games. For my own research, while I am not using LPs to understand games, I am providing a better understanding of LPs, and so my findings can be used as part of a toolset for improved analysis of games through LPs.

2.2 Who Makes Let's Plays?

In this section, I will be going over the concepts and literature I drew from when researching those who make Let's Plays, or the Let's Player. In order to demonstrate how my work has been informed by Human Computer Interaction as a field of study, I drew upon a variety of texts on topics including participatory culture, online forms of participation, content creators, and serious leisure pursuits. By following the connections between participatory culture to serious leisure studies, I will demonstrate how the individual members of the LP community behave through the lens of HCI and related disciplines. This section is intended to introduce these key concepts, as they were significant to my research design when it came to understanding Let's Players.

2.2.1 Participatory Culture

Since many of the existing texts that study Let's Plays focus on YouTube Let's Plays, they share a common thread in Burgess and Green, in their book *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture* (Burgess and Green, 2009). This text is practically essential for understanding the cultural media production and practices of early YouTube, and is relied upon by many scholars investigating Let's Plays in general. Due to the ever-changing nature of YouTube, the 2009 version of *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture* is somewhat outdated. There is a newer version that was published in 2018, but it appears that most of the texts on Let's Play have used the older one. However, Burgess and Green do note that most of their findings in the 2009 version are still applicable to the state of YouTube in 2018, and the book discusses the relevant changes in regards to their original work (Burgess and Green, 2018).

Burgess and Green use Jenkins' definition of participatory culture to describe YouTube, where it is a culture in which "fans and other consumers are invited to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content" (Jenkins, 2006). Using this same definition, we can then see that the Let's Play subforum on *Something Awful* is a participatory culture for members to congregate. It provides space and motivation for members to create and share LP content, with veteran members giving advice on recording and editing techniques to

newcomers. Participatory culture in general highlights how the distinction between media producers and consumers becomes blurred, and how new forms of user generated content platforms, like YouTube, have changed the ways in which audiences interpret and react to media content (Burgess et al., 2009).

Other authors have explored the nature of the fan producer in different contexts, such as content producers using Minecraft as a focus (MacCallum-Stewart, 2013). Some authors, such as Albrechtslund (2010), suggest that viewing fandom productivity as the primary feature of participatory culture is problematic, arguing that fandoms as more than just what members produce from within and around a game space. Albrechtslund's focus was on guild forums for the game *World of Warcraft.* They described a distinction between instrumental productivity, such as creating texts that can improve play skills, and expressive productivity, such as creating texts that don't directly support playing and are more creative. However, these two forms were produced by the same players (2010, 114). When we look at the LP subforum, we can find similar parallels, as different types of LPs can serve as instrumental or expressive types of productivity, yet there are LPers who can create both. Understanding the practices of making and consuming Let's Plays as a form of participatory culture allows us to draw connections to more specific forms of leisure communities, like serious leisure hobbyists.

2.2.2 Serious Leisure

Robert A. Stebbins, a leading expert on leisure studies, 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 centred on acquiring and expressing its special skills, knowledge and experience" (Stebbins, 1992).

Serious leisure concepts are an excellent complement to the participatory culture texts that have previously been used in studying LPs. Many hobbies can be considered as forms of serious leisure, such as long distance running, bushwalking and barbershop singing (Yair, 1990; Hamilton-Smith, 1993; Stebbins, 1996). Since LPs are viewed as a hobbyist pursuit by scholars and LPers themselves, examining them through the lens of serious leisure makes sense for understanding them.

Serious leisure can be identified by six distinctive qualities: the need to *persevere*, to be able to find a *career* in the activity, a significant personal *effort* based on specialty *knowledge*,

training or skills, a number of *durable benefits or outcomes*, that participants *identify* strongly with their chosen pursuit, and a *unique ethos* that grows out of participation in that activity (Stebbins, 2006, 450-451). Most of these qualities are prominently displayed in the SA LP subforum, in one way or another. While the *career* aspect of making Let's Plays was not present from the foundation in 2007, tools have become available since then that make it viable, such as Patreon and YouTube ad revenue. From observations, Let's Players sometimes link to these sources of income at the end of their videos or in their update posts in their thread, but there is no requirement that every LPer has a Patreon to participate in the subforum. The specialty *knowledge* can be found in the guides and feedback threads, which provide a space for newcomers to learn from veterans on things like how to record their commentary, what programs are best suited for editing, and how to configure video codecs to maintain their videos' quality. This is also a reflection of the *effort* that the members of the subforum put into their LP content, and we could expect the steps they take to maintain a standard of quality they find appropriate to be indicative of that effort. Further, from observations, these guides show the *training and skills* that LPers develop as part of their content production. Less obvious are the *durable benefits and outcomes*, and I discuss this in more detail in Chapter 4.

One other important detail about serious leisure to note is the motivations that people have for taking part in them. As these are forms of leisure that require more dedication than 'casual leisure' (Stebbins, 2006, 448), there are more tangible outcomes to them, besides simple enjoyment. Common to most forms of serious leisure is participants finding "self-actualization, self-enrichment, self-expression, regeneration or renewal of self, feelings of accomplishment, enhancement of self-image, social interaction and belongingness and lasting physical products of the activity" (Stebbins, 2006, 451). While there are not any direct physical products to making an LP, we can expect to find the non-physical types within the LP subforum.

2.2.3 Let's Play Producers

In order to understand how and why Let's Plays are produced, previous authors have employed ethnographic methods to explore the phenomenon. As interviewing members of a community is necessary for developing a picture of that group, several authors have reached out to Let's Players, with mixed results. Ash Kapriyelov, in their master's thesis, pointed out a similar issue I found while researching Let's Play, where they "often struggled to find relevant and up-to-date academic material because the industry evolves quickly; Let's Plays

are a relatively new aspect within the industry…there would be very little material available on the subject" (Kapriyelov, 2016, 4).

Kapriyelov starts by providing definitions not just for LP, but for several associated terms, which helps by defining different associated traits, based on their research into the phenomenon. Additionally, he also defines other forms of gaming-adjacent media, such as Long Plays, Speed Runs, and Walkthroughs (2016, 7), though the definitions he uses place them as types of Let's Plays, rather than distinct forms of media. He goes on to highlight the importance of LP in how it benefits game developers in terms of marketing, since LP can have positive or negative influence on the sales of a game, depending on how it is presented by Let's Players (Kaprieylov, 2016, 10).

Kaprieylov's own research used samples from the Let's Play Archive and YouTube, though he does not provide a detailed method on which LPs were chosen for examination beyond stating that "some of these videos were produced by the participants in this research, whilst others were made by entirely different channels in order to provide a deeper and more diverse perspective on the subject" (2016, 12). This seems to be partially because of Kaprieylov's focus on the interview portion of his work, as indicated by the mention of 'participants' in the previous quote. Kaprieylov recruited three participants for qualitative interviews, all of whom had been producing LP content for many years prior to that point (2016, 14), contacting "two of the participants…through a personal network of contacts, while one was contacted via Twitter" (2016, 15).

While "the limited number of participants was…a major drawback for this research…the aim of this study was not to cover all aspects and nuances of Let's Play production, but to create a background for further research" (2016, 15). The criteria by which Kapriyelov chose participants is not clear, but the overall structure of the interviews serves as inspiration for my own research. The use of open-ended interview questions, with participants who produce content through different techniques, provides valuable qualitative data about Let's Players. If anything, applying similar ideas to a larger group of participants should build an even clearer picture of the history and behaviours of Let's Players.

The main findings Kapriyelov provide highlight the participatory nature of LP audiences, and how the interaction between Let's Players and their audiences determines the levels of success their LP content will reach. This comes from LPer's actions towards their audience community, such as engaging "with debates in their videos' comments sections, through

social media, and via the [video games' fandoms'] message boards" (2016, 25). He also points out a difference between audiences on YouTube alone and those from *Something Awful* threads, drawing from Strangelove's work on YouTube that looked at the nature of audiences on the platform (2012), as "each Let's Player can submit their video and receive feedback and critique from fellow creators and prosumers" (Kapriyelov, 2016, 26). This situates the *Something Awful* LP community as one that can respond more directly to the content created by its members, as it acts more as a community of peers, compared to the comments section on any given video on YouTube. I go into more depth on these ideas in a paper I previously published, which is featured in Chapter 4, as the participants in the series of interviews I conducted reported how valuable the resources and feedback provided by their peers was when creating their content.

Fjaellingsdal also contacted individuals about their level of participation in Let's Play communities, as documented in his Master's thesis *Let's Graduate – A Thematic Analysis of the Let's Play Phenomena* (Fjaellingsdal, 2014). The researcher in this case reached out to 21 people but was only able to interview nine. The intent of his research was not necessarily to cover the entire community of Let's Play, as it "was conducted in order to reveal and identify central themes composing the motivational aspects of the popular Let's Play media phenomenon" (2014, 4). Fjaellingsdal shows that, "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" (2014, 16). It is important to note the time in which Fjaellingsdal did this research, as these findings, while almost a decade old at this point, still reflect the feelings of Let's Play audiences and creators, at least based on what I found during my first study (see chapter 4, section 4.2). Fjaellingsdal shows that people seek out Let's Plays to have a positive experience watching them, while those that make LPs do it in order to provide that experience (2014, 26). One of his participants stated that "he considers Let's Plays to be a generally entertaining phenomenon that simultaneously provides a more wholesome picture of how the game plays (2014, 27)," which indicates that an LP provides more than what can be found in something like a straightforward walkthrough of a game. The nature of an LP, in a sense, contributes something more to the experience of a game, such that watching an LP and playing the same game are two different experiences, and that what an audience

While Fjaellingsdal was unable to interview every person contacted in his recruitment, there is much to be learned by the methods he employed in contacting them. When reaching out to informants, Fjaellingsdal contacted 21 people, and while the majority did not reply or dropped out partway through, this was expected, due to a variety of factors:

> 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 (Fjaellingsdal, 2014, 20).

This demonstrates that contacting interview participants should not be limited to a single method of communication. In order to collect a sufficient sample size, utilizing multiple options for contacting members of Let's Play communities is probably required. However, Fjaellingsdal's decision to only conduct one of the interviews orally, and allow the rest of the participants to respond to the questions at their own leisure with a text-based version of the questions, seems counter-intuitive to the goals of the study (2014, 21). By giving the option of text-based responses, participants would have more time to consider their answers, which could lead to them restraining themselves from what they would say in a verbal interview. If the intention is to gather responses that are direct and unplanned, face-to-face interviews would be a better fit.

2.3 Let's Play Communities

Let's Plays have some presence in academic research, though it is spread across multiple disciplines. As described in the previous section, understanding Let's Plays as a form of paratext is a common approach in some of these texts. One example is *Let's Play: Exploring Literacy Practices in an Emerging Video Game Paratext* (Burwell and Miller, 2016), which utilizes one of the research approaches from Lankshear and Knobel's *Researching New Literacies* (Lankshear and Knobel, 2007) described as the 'Let's See' approach. Burwell and Miller write that, for them, "this Let's See approach to new literacies means considering LPs not only as artefacts, but as practices and sites for the production of social relations. It also means taking into account the practices and perspectives of both producers *and* audience members" (Burwell and Miller, 2016, 112). They go on to outline the methods of examining Let's Plays on YouTube for this purpose. A critical element that is missing from their study,

however, is the inclusion of the original *Something Awful* Let's Play community, as it would have provided them with ample evidence of how producers and audiences of Let's Plays interact. While the researchers may have not been able to cover this area due to the scope of their work, some acknowledgement of the SA LP subforum would have sufficed to show they had fully considered the environments in which Let's Plays are found.

While it may sound like the omission of the *Something Awful* Let's Play community renders these texts unusable, there are still valuable insights to be found in YouTube Let's Plays. As I discussed previously in section 2.1.2, researchers can and have used Let's Plays as a way to analyse other concepts, especially within the field of game studies and design. This shows us that researchers are already equipped to employ Let's Plays as a methodological tool, which encourages a better system of understanding of them so that more advanced studies can be undertaken.

2.3.1 Cultural Capital

In this section, I will discuss the subject of cultural and subcultural capital, and how they apply to Let's Play. I use the concept of cultural capital to describe the differences between the LP subforum and LP content outside of it, specifically the mainstream form on YouTube. In broad terms, the idea of cultural capital comes from Bourdieu's work, which has since been further distilled by other authors in various ways. Originally, cultural capital referred to the manner in which consumption of specific kinds of media indicates a person's class or social standing, and that, "all cultural practices (museum visits, concert-going, reading etc.), and preferences in literature, painting or music, are closely linked to educational level (measured by qualifications or length of schooling) and secondarily to social origin" (Bourdieu, 1984). In this way, the level of cultural capital someone has, as determined by their social positioning, gives them different forms of distinction and benefits. This, too, is reflected in online content like Let's Plays, as being known for making LPs can benefit the LPer, in financial rewards or celebrity status. Young describes Bourdieu's concept as "an attempt at conceptualizing assets valued by the legitimate culture of a given society" (2006, 259). In the context of online media, cultural capital is not just the kinds of content held in high regard by a given community. It also encompasses the practices and behaviours that orbit the community and that media. For the purposes of my thesis, I use cultural capital as a prelude to understanding subcultural capital. If we view Let's Plays as a performative element of online cultural capital, their similarities with online reviews, such as those discussed by Maarit Jaakkola (2018), become apparent. There is some overlap between LP

videos and video game reviews, but for the purposes of this thesis, it is not necessary for an LP to be critical of the game being played. An LP can showcase a game without detailed analysis of it, though there are certainly LPs that do so as part of their commentary.

Derived from Bourdieu's work, subcultural capital is not quite the same as cultural capital, but rather a concept that describes the cultural artifacts and practices of those not in the majority culture. It refers to those ideas and behaviours that a subcultural group holds in response to a more dominant culture, or, in other words, an 'underground' versus a 'mainstream.' Thornton uses it when discussing the UK club cultures she investigated, and how "subcultural capital is objectified in the form of fashionable haircuts and well-assembled record collections" (1995, 27). Tofalvy takes this further, and emphasizes that "participants having more underground cultural capital at their disposal occupy a higher position in the scene hierarchy, and those who have not succeeded in gathering subcultural capital have an accordingly lower position" (2020, 66). We see similar practices in the LP subforum, where LPers who produce LP content that appeals to more of the audience of their peers are seen as better role models for newer members. There is more of a push towards learning from and emulating the styles of recognized LPers, as will be discussed in Chapter 4. While Let's Play doesn't have the same sort of physical markers of cultural capital, these ideas are still useful for understanding the differences between LP communities outside of SA. Previous work has highlighted the transformational nature of making Let's Plays, where the value of the capital that comes from LP content is more symbolic than economic (Boomer et al, 2018). Going forward in the thesis, it is important to keep in mind that early LPs in the subforum's history were made to differentiate themselves from YouTube. This is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4, when I interview members of the subforum about how the community viewed external LPers.

2.3.2 Superparticipants and Online Communities

Similar to cultural capital, in terms of concepts related to participation in online communities, another key driver is engagement, or how the audience of an LP reacts to the content.

There are many perspectives for understanding online communities, but for the purposes of my own research, I required ones that examined the active participation in creating and maintaining a community. I looked for texts such as those by Butler et al (2007), as they focused on the group dynamics of online communities. Texts on movement between gaming related communities were also surveyed, such as when a new entry in a game series prompted

the creation of new sections of an already established group (Bergstrom and Poor, 2021). Since part of my research would be on the history and development of the SA LP subforum, I needed an understanding of how such groups operated. Of particular interest is how members in an online group "devote the time and effort needed to perform community maintenance activities" (Butler et al, 2007, 7), as these behaviours would logically inform other elements of the community. Within the context of the LP subforum, maintenance activities meant things like moderation of rules infractions, answering questions in the newcomer/advice threads, and making sure completed LPs were ready for off-site archival, among other tasks.

One explanation for which members of a community dictate the development of the group came from political science. Graham and Wright wrote on the concept of 'superparticipants' and how a small minority of dedicated posters on a forum could direct the overall group (2013). While their research was on political discussion groups, the concept could be applied to the LP subforum, as it was a potential explanation as to what kinds of LPs drew the most attention. Following the superparticipant model from Graham and Wright, we could expect that a small group of highly productive and popular Let's Players would set a level of quality as the expectation for any newcomer. However, as I will explore in Chapter 5, this did not turn out to be completely true in the context of the LP subforum.

Other texts reviewed for this thesis cover related topics, such as the insularity of online spaces (Allison and Bussey, 2020). Their work looked at the ways in which online communities that did not prioritize diversity could tend towards insularity, and documented the processes that lead to insular communities (2020). These ideas were supplemented with additional texts on related topics, including, but not limited to, the dysfunctional nature of *Something Awful* (Pater et al, 2014; Phillips, 2015), lurking/invisible participants and their influence on online communities (Soroka and Rafaeli, 2006), and the development of pseudonyms and online identities (van der Nagel, 2017).

2.3.3 Descendants of Let's Play Communities

As mentioned previously when discussing the history of Let's Play on *Something Awful*, the LP phenomenon has been a precursor to other forms of online gaming media, like streaming, esports, and speedrunning. While analysing the transition of Let's Players to streamers and streaming communities is somewhat outside the scope of my research, I wish to acknowledge those practices as another aspect of the wider field of research I situate my work within.

Streaming, especially of video games, has been examined as a part of game studies before, with authors studying how the practice transforms an interactive medium (video games) into a more passive viewing experience (Smith et al, 2013). Similarly, Let's Plays do much the same, though both have various ways of incorporating audience participation, depending on the methods employed by the streamer or Let's Player. While the platforms used for streaming are roughly as old as Let's Play (Justin.tv, one of the earliest streaming sites and predecessor to Twitch, started in 2007), their use for streaming video games did not really take off until improvements to the technical systems that underpinned them. Much like how Let's Plays on YouTube did not gain traction until improvements to video length and quality were made around 2010, platforms like Twitch did not appear until around 2011. While understanding the evolution of streaming content and platforms is outside the scope of my research, it is an important consideration for future scholars, especially when examining the monetization systems that developed alongside streaming and Let's Play.

eSports, similarly, may have been around longer than Let's Play, depending on what definition is applied. Early authors state that eSports originated in the late nineties (Wagner, 2006), though there is debate about the differences in that form of electronic sports and the modern kinds (Hamari and Sjöblom, 2017). In brief, "a form of sports where the primary aspects of the sport are facilitated by electronic systems; the input of players and teams as well as the output of the eSports system are mediated by human-computer interfaces (Hamari and Sjöblom, 2017)," and is commonly used to referred to competitive games played for audiences in a sporting context. In regards to the relationship to Let's Plays, eSports doesn't have an evolutionary connection, but still possesses a number of aspects in common. Namely, the performative nature of the player(s), the presence of an audience (viewing simultaneously or otherwise), and the use of video games as a basis for paratextual media. Understanding eSports in detail is not critical to studying Let's Plays, but it is useful to delineate the two practices to avoid confusion.

Speedrunning also shares several characteristics with Let's Play, though they are more related by the content being made, instead of the performance by players. Speedrunning generally refers to the practice of playing a game to completion as fast as possible, sometimes with additional challenges or restrictions on the player (Scully-Blaker, 2014). This means that spreedruns of games overlap with challenge focused LPs, though the LPs tend to take their time to commentate on more of a game. While not an evolutionary descendent of LP, speedrunners sometimes employ performative practices in certain contexts, especially for

fundraising and charity work, such as Awesome Games Done Quick, an annual event with speedruns of a wide variety of games over a week.

2.4 Literature Summary

To summarize, the concepts covered by the literature reviewed for this work include participatory culture, serious leisure, cultural capital, superparticipants, and paratexts. These ideas inform and direct how this work examines and analyses the LP subforum and LPs in general. Going forward, I will be utilizing them extensively to describe my research and findings.

From the texts on participatory culture, the main concept to remember is the nature of media production and audiences of consumers. In a participatory culture, such as Let's Playing in general and the LP subforum in particular, the line between content producer and consumer is blurred, and LPers have come to occupy a position that contains both.

From the texts on serious leisure, we have identified the main qualities that make clear how the LP subforum behaves as a site of serious leisure. It is important to note the factors that motivate people to join serious leisure activities and communities, as those motivations will be a primary focus in Chapter 4, where I detail the interviews I conducted with LPers.

The texts on cultural and subcultural capital provide an explanation for how niche communities value different things from the mainstream. Therefore, the kinds of cultural capital that are valued within the LP subforum are different from the mainstream YouTube LP field, even though LPs on SA existed before YouTube was a viable host. I will use these concepts to make clear how the LP subforum differentiates itself from the mainstream forms of LP. This will be an important element in understanding how certain LPs draw engagement, as will be discussed in Chapter 5.

The concepts covered in Section 2.3.2 about superparticipants and online communities will be primarily useful in Chapter 5. The key ideas about superparticipants that I will apply are about how to determine what constitutes a superparticipant, and what influence they have on the rest of the community in terms of communal identity or types of media produced. When looking at the LP subforum, these ideas, supplemented with insights from participatory culture and fandom productivity literature, will help explain who or what sets the tone for the kinds of LPs that become popular within the subforum.

Finally, the concepts from paratexts will be relevant in Chapter 6, where I present my findings from my thematic analysis of several LP threads. In order to understand them better, it is beneficial to consider them as forms of paratexts, as they occupy a space outside the original game as text but are not necessarily completely separate from it. Understanding how LPs function as paratexts will be useful in better defining and categorizing them.

Now that I have outlined the important concepts and literature in the above sections, I am prepared to explain the research in the later parts of this thesis. With the knowledge of the background history of the LP subforum, and the understanding of concepts like serious leisure, cultural capital, and online communities, I can better describe the work I have done. Before getting to the studies I conducted, I need to outline the methodology I used in the design of my research. In Chapter 3, I discuss the research strategy I used and the epistemology and ontology that informed the later steps taken in my work. I will then go over the different methods I employed in the actual studies I did.

Chapter 3: Methods

3.1 Research Design

Now that I have situated my research in previous literature and described the primary research questions and goals, I will explain the research design for this thesis. I begin by summarizing the *abductive* research strategy, which acts as the primary research strategy I used throughout my thesis, then continue by describing the specific epistemology and ontology I worked with. After describing these higher-level research strategies and frameworks, I go into detail on the methods used in the three studies I conducted for this thesis. As a reminder, each of the three studies was designed to address one of the primary research questions I had:

- What motivated the early LP producers on *Something Awful* to participate in their creation?
- What community behaviours and practices define the SA LP community, and how have they changed over time?
- What are the key components that define and characterize LP content and its development on *Something Awful*?

3.1.1 The Abductive Research Strategy

As described by Blaikie, the abductive research strategy "involves constructing theories that are derived from social actors' language, meanings and accounts in the context of everyday activities" (2010, 89). The main goal of the abductive strategy is to develop an understanding of a specific social context or 'world,' by taking "the meanings and interpretations, the motives and intentions, that people use in their everyday lives, and elevate them to a central place in social theory and research" (Blaikie, 2010, 89). I started my investigations with the intention of letting the LP community speak for itself, in a sense, and wanted to avoid imposing any external framework of understanding upon it. Since one of the main goals in my research is developing a better understanding of the LP community, adopting this overall strategy was logical. Blaikie draws upon Giddens (1993), stating that "according to Giddens, the mutual knowledge social actors use to negotiate their encounters with others, and to make sense of social activity, is the fundamental subject matter of the social sciences" (Blaikie, 2010, 89). What this means is that, in order to understand a social group like the Let's Play subforum, I needed to examine the ways in which they communicate with one another and to

those external to the subforum. From this, I would be able to uncover the mutual knowledge that they share, and derive a more complete understanding of Let's Play as a practice and a social grouping.

3.1.2 The Ontology of the Idealist and the Epistemology of Constructionism

To further define and specify my research methods, I used the ontological assumptions of the *idealist*, as described by Blaikie (2010, 93). Ontological assumptions are "concerned with the nature of social reality. These assumptions make claims about what kinds of social phenomena do or can exist, the conditions of their existence, and the ways in which they are related" (2010, 92). The idealist form of ontology, as I will describe below, is what I found to be most suitable for understanding Let's Plays, not just as a social grouping, but also as a phenomenon. While an LP by itself is an object within the external world, it is still experienced by individuals in a wide variety of contexts, cultural or otherwise. Therefore, I find it best to view the reality that is LPs through the idealist framing, where "reality consists of representations of the human mind" (Blaikie, 2010, 93). Furthermore, "social reality is made up of shared interpretations that social actors produce and reproduce as they go about their daily lives" (2010, 93) which means we can only effectively interpret them based on the combined experiences of social actors, myself as the researcher also included. Thus, in order to fully understand the social reality of LP from the idealist standpoint, I would need to focus on the accounts and interpretations of that reality from members of the LP community itself.

Blaikie's version of epistemological assumptions, which are "concerned with what kinds of knowledge are possible – how we can know these things – and with criteria for deciding when knowledge is both adequate and legitimate" (2010, 92) helped to formulate the research framework I use throughout. The form I use is *constructionism*, which holds that knowledge is built from the lived experiences and accounts of people making sense of their world, and the social scientist's role is to translate that into more specific language (2010, 95).

Blaikie is not first to describe the constructionist epistemology, though his interpretation differs somewhat from other authors. Crotty defines it as stating that "all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context" (1998, 42). One of the key differences between these two forms of constructionism is where they emphasise the act of interpreting the world. Crotty's discussion of constructionism describes a more philosophical version of

understanding the world and the objects within it through the human consciousness, and that objective and subjective truths of the world must be taken together, which becomes constructionism (44). Blaikie, on the other hand, does not consider the philosophical dimension to the same extent, and is more concerned with the social actors at play. Since social knowledge comes from interactions between social actors, which is then interpreted by the researcher, who has their own social background and contexts, Blaikie suggests that constructionism should incorporate all these different facets in its approach to meaning and truths (Blaikie, 2010, 95). From this, we can understand Crotty's definition as a higher-level version, which Blaikie has interpreted and focused down to a form more readily applicable for my own work.

A further similar type of epistemology to constructionism is *constructivism* (Creswell, 2003, 8). As described by Creswell, constructivism has many of the same qualities as constructionism, but the focus is different enough to be significant. Simply put, construc*tiv*ism focuses on the individual's interaction with objects in their world and making sense of them, while construct*ion*ism examines the cultural and subcultural contexts that the individual exists in (Crotty, 1998, 79). Since my research subject is the LP community, rather than specific members that belong to it, I have used constructionism as part of my research framework. That is not to say that I will not be considering the individual perspective when it comes to the LP community, just that I will be considering it more in relation to the surrounding contexts. Early in the process of this thesis I had some difficulty, as a graduate researcher, in choosing between the two epistemologies. It was only after performing the first of my research studies that I ultimately decided on Blaikie's constructionism, as it was most applicable to the research goals I had.

3.1.3 Adapting the Epistemology to the Research Design

Once I was certain in my choice of epistemology, I then needed to make sure it fit well within the abductive research strategy. While it made sense initially to use them in conjunction, as I had drawn upon Blaikie again for my research strategy, I felt it prudent to look into alternatives first before making a final decision. One alternative to the abductive research strategy is the grounded theory method. First developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), the Grounded Theory Method is used predominantly in the qualitative research area. As described by Beng Kok Ong as part of their comparison of Grounded Theory Method (GTM) and the abductive research strategy (2012), some of the main elements of GTM include, but are not limited to:

- Data collection proceeds in association with data analysis
- Analytic codes and categories come from the data and are not pre-conceived
- Theory generation is emphasized throughout collection and analysis (Ong, 2012, 419)

At first, while reviewing this literature for my own research, GTM seemed appropriate. By design, GTM appears to be more focused on the subject, rather than the theories used to analyse it, but I still felt I needed a measure of more rigid theory to explore the subject of LP. I did not need to create some new theory related to Let's Plays, but rather, I would be better served by a research strategy that would help me to understand phenomena like LP. I judged the abductive research strategy from Blaikie to be better suited to my research plans, as part of the process of applying the strategy involves using the collected accounts from social actors to develop theory and knowledge (2010, 90). This strategy "adopts a 'bottom up' rather than a 'top down' approach" and "tries to present descriptions and understanding that reflect the social actors' point of view rather than adopting entirely the researcher's point of view" (Blaikie, 2010, 91). I knew from my previous observations of the LP subforum that I would need to provide descriptions that members of that community would understand and, more importantly, agree with. In other words, I needed to ensure their accounts and perspectives were faithfully represented in my writing, and that is why I settled on adopting the abductive strategy.

Early in the design and planning process of my thesis, I initially considered using ethnography as the main research strategy to work from. As described by Boellstorff et al, digital ethnography is a valuable set of methods for exploring and studying online groups, cultures, and spaces (Boellstorff et al, 2012) and could be suited for my purposes. While their version of digital ethnography was originally developed for virtual worlds, such as Massively Multiplayer Online games (otherwise known as MMOs), many of the methods described in *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds* would work in non-game environments. Thus, it appeared relevant to my context and topic of study of the online cultural practice and community of Let's Play. However, a core component of the ethnographic tradition is for the researcher to be an active participant in their chosen culture (Boellstorff et al, 2012). It would be difficult to use this methodology as part of my historical analysis, which I was doing as to address gaps in the existing literature. Although the subforum persists, much of my focus is on its historical development, evolution, and impact. While I may have some presence within the LP subforum, I did not fully consider myself as an active participant, and am unable to access historical social interactions with this method, beyond those that might be saved within

archived LPs. If I were to utilize an ethnographic methodology, I would need much more time than I had originally planned, and would not be able to conduct the same number of studies as I planned on.

Furthermore, since part of my research focus, as identified in the gaps I found with previous texts on LPs, was on the history of LP, I felt that the abductive strategy would fulfill that purpose better. Digital ethnography is much more concerned with cultures and societies in the moment that the researcher observes them, and have some limitations in examining the historical context beyond personal accounts from participants. In order to present my findings as they relate to the historical context of the LP subforum, I found the abductive strategy and constructionism a better fit. This is not to say I did not learn anything useful from digital ethnography, as some of the methods on interviewing and participant observation proved useful. One of the components found in ethnographic research is a mixed methods approach, which helped me understand how to better utilize multiple research techniques. If nothing else, should I continue this research after this thesis, conducting a digital ethnographic study feels worthwhile.

3.2 Methodological Context for Data Collection and Generation

Now that I have laid out the overall framework of understanding for my thesis, I will go into the specific processes by which I gathered data for analysis. For my research, I conducted three separate studies, each oriented to address one of the three critical components of the LP subforum phenomenon. Two of these studies were published in academic journals, and are reprinted in their respective chapters, while the third was written up as a chapter from the start. Since each was focused on one aspect of the LP phenomenon (the individual members, the community, and the content of LPs), each needed slightly different methods of data collection and generation. I have organized the later chapters to present the studies chronologically, and will go over each of the methods for them in the same order. In the following sections, I will go over the research methods used in each study, and how they relate to the constructionist epistemology and abductive research strategy.

In the table below I summarize the methods used, the methodology, and the ontological and epistemological stances I described. Additionally, I label each study and the corresponding methods according to the primary research subject they were focused on.

Table 1: Summary of methods used in the three studies

	Study 1: The People of LP	Study 2: The Community of LP	Study 3: The Content of LP
Methods	Semi-structured interviews Purposive sampling Reflexive thematic analysis	Quantitative data scraping Descriptive Quantitative Analysis Sequential mixed methods	Close reading Iterative coding Reflexive Thematic analysis
Research Strategy: Abductive			
Ontology – Idealist (Blaikie, 2010)			
Epistemology – Constructionism (Blaikie, 2010; Crotty, 1998)			

3.2.1 The People of Let's Play

The first study was to examine the people that make up the LP Subforum community, and to discover their motivations for participation. Candidates for the interviews were members who were active at different points in the lifetime of the subforum, such that their collective perspectives covered 2007 to 2020 (when the interviews took place). In line with the constructionist methods, the intent for this study was not to focus on the individual perspectives, but rather, to take those perspectives together and understand the contextual elements around them. For this reason, I decided to conduct semi-structured interviews with members of the *Something Awful* Let's Play Subforum, and the steps I took are described in the next section. I sought to recruit members both past and present, in order to construct a historical picture of how the LP Subforum developed.

3.2.1.1 Candidate Recruitment

To find candidates for interviews, a set of specific requirements were chosen. Criteria for selection included the number of completed LPs on the *Something Awful* Let's Play Archive, the period of time they were active on the SA LP subforum, and availability of contact information for recruitment. I used the LP Archive as a reference to identify LPers who had completed LPs in different years since the subforum's founding. This ensured that the accounts of their participation would cover the 14 years the subforum has been active and provide a historical context for the findings. I 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 as possible in the selection. This method adopted purposive sampling, 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 the sampling was that they had completed an LP on the SA LP subforum. That way, I was certain that all my participants possessed at least the minimum amount of commitment to finishing a Let's Play project. I used purposive sampling in this way to serve the later research tasks, as I would need candidates from across the history of the subforum to develop a rich understanding of the subforum. Through this understanding, I would then be able to see what impacts the LP subforum had on the genre itself, and the ways in which external changes in Let's Playing might have had influence on the subforum in turn. By carefully selecting participants, I would be better able to find those who could provide historical accounts of the subforum at the times they were most active. From going through the LP Archives, I collected a list of around 100 names, which I then narrowed down to fit the criteria I outlined above, leaving roughly half the list.

From that list of around 50 individuals that met these requirements, I went on to conduct interviews with 34 past and present members of the LP subforum. I contacted them through whatever publicly available means were open to me, including emails, Twitter direct messages, private messages through *Something Awful*, and through Discord messages. I wanted as many interviews as I could conduct from those initial 50 for a few key reasons. As previously mentioned during the last chapter, interviewing LPers to understand the practice has been done by previous authors (Fjællingsdal, 2014; Kapriyelov, 2016). My contribution, by conducting 34 interviews, was to give a specific set of accounts from the SA LP subforum, which had not yet been featured in the literature. These new accounts provide insights and understanding of the subforum, beyond just the new stories from its members. As in line with constructionism, by building a historical basis from these accounts, further studies can use them as the context by which they examine similar communities. There is considerable overlap with streaming, and many of the participants stated they also streamed content similar to their Let's Plays. Streaming, as a comparatively newer media genre, has common elements to Let's Playing, and studies investigating streaming communities or behaviours could use Let's Plays as a comparison point. Additionally, by interviewing as many individuals in the original candidate list as possible, I wanted to ensure that none of their accounts held more significance than the rest. The abductive and constructionist framework I was working in prioritized understanding a social reality built from social actors' perspectives, and focusing on only a few of them would undermine my findings, as the findings from that would only apply to a small percentage of Let's Players. I wanted to build a perspective of the Let's Play

subforum members that was reasonably accurate to the majority and not limited to a select minority. By conducting many interviews, my findings would more accurately describe the members of the LP subforum, at least in regards to their motivations for participating in making LPs.

3.2.1.2 The Interviews

I conducted the interviews themselves online, through the chat program Discord. Only the audio of the interviews was recorded, and the recordings were then transcribed for later analysis. I did the first interview in December 2019 and the last in late February 2020.

The interview questions were open ended, and apart from a few questions about when they started making LPs and how they found the subforum, most of my questions came from their responses to the last one. The decision to conduct the interviews as open ended partially came from the potential benefits from that method (Rapley, 2001). Rich qualitative data would come more from natural conversations, and I, as the interviewer, had to be cognizant of how the participants would respond to my position. I did not want to intimidate or otherwise make the participants give responses that did not reflect how they felt about LP. Consequently, this meant that some of the interviews ran longer than others, as the participants would go into great detail about events from their time on the subforum, and interrupting them would be counterproductive for my research goals. Above all else, I wanted to incorporate their responses into my writing as faithfully as possible, according to the previously described constructionist and abductive strategies. The responses to my questions were the most direct form of a constructed social reality, based on social actors' accounts, in that respect. For future research, if nothing else, I wanted my participants to come away from the interview content with their responses and at least interested to see the paper I was writing about them, so that they would not be afraid to accept future requests for interviews. While it was not a concern at the sample size I was working at, there were a few candidates who declined to be interviewed, saying that they had been treated poorly by interviewers in the past. Considering the community nature of the subforum, and my position within it as a participant observer, giving off a bad impression in the interviews would jeopardize any future research on this LP community, not just for myself but for any research that came after me.

3.2.1.3 Ethical Concerns

As part of the recruitment and early preparation for the study, I underwent training for ethical research practices. This involved understanding the basic requirements of a researcher for the

University of Melbourne, primarily to minimize any form of harm to participants and the researcher. Prior to conducting the interviews, I created a proposal document for the interview process, which was reviewed by an appropriate ethics board to ensure I had followed the correct ethical guidelines.

As part of the recruitment process, candidates were informed via a plain language document what I was doing with the study. Before any of the study questions were asked, I made sure to have their verbal consent on record and made sure they were aware that they could revoke that consent at any time. In addition to using pseudonyms in any written transcripts from the interviews, I provided a transcript of each participant's interview to them, so that they could make any specific requests in regard to information they wanted obfuscated or otherwise removed. Further, I tried to keep participants separate from each other, and asked that they not discuss the contents of the interviews with anyone. I knew that, because of the relatively small population of the LP subforum, there was a high likelihood that discussion during the interviews could concern other participants. I wanted to ensure that whatever was included in my published materials would not disrupt either the relationships between members of the LP community, or my own position as a participant-researcher of it. As mentioned in the previous section, there were a few potential candidates who ultimately declined to be interviewed. They had previous bad experiences with researchers which left them unwilling to take part in any research activities. I earnestly hoped that my own work did not disturb them in the same way, so that future scholars may be able to interview them later.

3.2.1.4 Thematic Analysis

For the coding and analysis of the interviews, thematic analysis was used, based on methods outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis "is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (2006, 6) and is a good fit within the constructionist framework I used. After the interviews were recorded and transcribed, I went through the transcriptions to begin generating codes. I go into more detail about the results in Chapter 4, but as a brief summary, the codes generated related to participants' motivations, their inspirations to join the LP subforum, and how they felt about their involvement. As I went through, I marked sections of their responses according to which set of codes it represented, and would create new categories if I saw there was a new thematic subject I had not covered yet. As I progressed through the data, initial codes would be organized into higher level themes, both for ease of use and to begin the process of developing themes.

Based on the literature and concepts from Serious Leisure, as covered in the previous chapter, I sought to generate themes appropriate to those ideas, as the LP subforum fits the definition of a serious leisure/hobbyist social group. Once all of the transcripts were coded in this way, I was then able to take stock and write up the findings as a journal article, reprinted as part of Chapter 4.

3.2.2 The Community of Let's Play

The second study I conducted took a slightly different approach in terms of methods. This study was designed to answer the question of "What community behaviours and practices define the SA LP community, and how have they changed over time?" The community behaviours of the LP subforum were relatively absent from existing literature, and in order to provide a way to understand it better, I would need to examine it based on how its members acted. Which kinds of LP threads drew the largest audiences? Have the kinds of LPs most common (in terms of game genre or LP style) changed over time, and why? I decided it would be best to adopt a mixed methods strategy, as making sense of the 14+ years of threads called for some quantitative tasks. Using Creswell's description of a sequential mixed methods strategy (2003, 16), I first used quantitative methods for data collection, then qualitative methods for making sense of that data.

3.2.2.1 Data Collection

I used a custom program to scrape data from the LP subforum. This program collected information on every thread still accessible[1], which could then be organized to better examine them in a series of spreadsheets. Each of the data points collected was to serve a purpose in understanding the subforum.

Each spreadsheet gave a specific lens by which to understand any given thread on the LP subforum. From the data points in these sheets, I could calculate which threads had the most unique posters, the highest number of posts during a specific time period, when the frequency of new posts was high or low, and which members of the forums were responsible for posting the most threads (or even who had the most posts in threads across the lifespan of the subforum). This data, and the data values that could be further derived from them, was

[1] The background systems that Something Awful runs on are known by the members of the forums for being poorly coded and documented, and it is possible that some of the threads of the LP subforum were lost or only partially archived. Additionally, some threads had been moved to other subforums, such as the Comedy Goldmine (an archive for threads of particular popularity on the forums as a whole) and were not collected by the scraper program.

important for describing the community context of the subforum, based on which LP threads drew in the most engagement from the subforum members. The factors that I used to measure engagement were number of total posts in a thread (representing the amount of active discussion generated by the LP) and number of unique posters within a thread (representing the general size of the audience for an LP). This way, I could show engagement as a measure of interaction from members of the subforum community. It wasn't necessarily important for my constructionist approach to know which user had the most LP threads or most posts within a thread. It was more important to know what kinds of threads in each year had the most unique posters and highest post counts, as this would indicate the factors that best drove engagement and which posters I should consider to be agenda setters or super participants. I already had some idea of what was considered 'valuable', in the sense of which threads were popular, based on the responses from participants in Study 1. Finding the quantitative data to support (or refute) the participants' responses was one of the goals of Study 2.

3.2.2.2 Ethical Concerns

While the ethical concerns of Study 2 were not as complex as the previous study, as I would not be directly contacting members of the LP subforum, there were still some aspects of the design of the study to protect the subforum population. I made sure the data I used from the scraper was not any information that was private or linked to public facing figures. At most, I would be able to link usernames to the threads they created or posted in, but the actual content of those posts would be absent from the data corpus. While I did read some of the threads in the data set closer, to get an idea of how certain threads functioned or reacted to different kinds of games, I made sure not to take notes on any sort of identifying/personal details within (if I even came across them in the first place). This meant that I did not have to take extensive steps to do no harm, beyond keeping any raw data collected in a secure, password-protected storage, which I plan to erase five years after the last publication that used that data. This is in accordance with the University of Melbourne's policy on data retention and security. Since I had no contact with any individuals, I did not need to obtain informed consent or provide anonymity, as I did in the first study.

3.2.2.3 Analysis

As previously mentioned, the initial quantitative approach to data collection was to provide focus for the qualitative analysis. I decided to not analyse the quantitative data by itself because it would not provide information that suited my research needs. In order to provide

results that fit within my abductive research strategy, I needed to apply methods of analysis that gave a more complete picture of the social context I was studying. The mixed methods approach, as described by Creswell (2003, 15), was useful here. I applied the sequential version of this approach, specifically one that begins "with a quantitative method in which theories or concepts are tested, to be followed by a qualitative method involving detailed exploration with a few cases or individual" (Creswell, 2003, 16). While I was not directly testing a specific theory in terms of quantitative analysis, the concept of the super-participant (Graham and Wright, 2013) is defined in quantifiable terms. Thus, I would be able to find a version of super-participants within my data, or, at the very least, LP threads they were responsible for. In this way, I planned to use the quantified data from the scraper to identify threads of potential rich data, that I then could examine through a qualitative lens. The data collected from the scraper allowed me to easily identify those threads of interest, namely those that had exceptionally high levels of engagement/posting frequencies. With that data in hand, I could then move to qualitative analysis of those threads, so that I could apply the concepts related to online communities I had surveyed prior to the study. Using the concept of super-participants from Graham and Wright (2013), I started by looking at the numbers of threads created for each user on the subforum.

3.2.3 The Let's Plays

For the third part of my research, I addressed the last of the topics I identified in my research questions: The content of Let's Plays. I chose to investigate this last as, in line with the abductive and constructionist ideas discussed previously, I wanted to have the context surrounding the LPs in hand. From the first two studies, I had a better idea of how the members of the community, and the community as a whole, viewed the content they produced and shared. With this in mind, I designed the last part of my thesis to define what parts of an LP were critical for it to hold value for the LP subforum.

3.2.3.1 Data Collection

Similar to the second study, I designed the third study by starting with a mixed methods approach. Using the data on the threads already collected, I searched through them to find the LP threads that had the most engagement from the subforum audience. High engagement, in this instance, meant high numbers of posts from a large audience of unique posters. For each of the 14 years of data, I selected the ten threads with the most posts in them, and that were of completed LP threads. In order to sort through and organize the threads, I went through them

multiple times, annotating each thread according to the genres of LP they contained, as well as building my set of codes I would use later for closer analysis. I marked these 140 threads according to a set of iterative codes, including the overall genres of LPs (which then were further divided into sub-categories), built partially from responses from interview participants and from the categories/tags used on the LP Archive. These codes would eventually become the themes I used to analyse the LPs in the third study.

Table 2: Genres used to organize LP threads

Genres Used to Organize Threads	Modifiers
Informative	Completionist/%100
Narrative	Challenge
Casual	Modded
Participatory	Schadenfreude
	Custom

I cover the different genres in more detail in Chapter 6, but I will summarize the main parts of them here. Each of the first four genres in the above list (Informative, Narrative, Casual, and Participatory) came originally from the tagging system on the LP Archive. I used them largely unchanged from that, as they served as useful descriptors of the type of LPs they held. The rest of the list serve as modifiers, overlapping with the main genres to distinguish particular styles of LPs, in terms of commentary, gameplay skill, or audience appeal.

My reasoning for organizing the list of threads in this way was that, in order to understand the content of LPs from the context of the people involved, I should start with the specific ways in which they organize or refer to that content. This fell in line with the constructionist framework, as I would be using the accounts and shared knowledge of the social actors I was studying to better describe them.

For each entry in the list of threads, I found the start and end dates of the LP, the format of the LP (screenshot or video), type of commentary, relevant tags or descriptors from the Archive or any interview that touched on them, the game(s) played and their release dates. From the list of 140 LPs, I then needed to narrow it down to a small handful that best

represented the initial codes I had. Seven threads were picked for close reading, and the process by which I selected those threads is covered in the next section.

3.2.3.2 Thread Selection

As a reminder, the primary goal of Study 3 was to understand the different kinds of LPs that have developed across the history of the subforum, and the critical aspects or components that go into making them highly engaged with. The initial genres were built in order to better navigate the dataset of 140 threads, by highlighting the topics or types of LPs that appeared most prominently. Each genre was defined to be distinct from each other based on clear and observable traits, while still being broad enough to allow for overlapping categories when needed. For example, several threads in the first dataset had traits that identified them as belonging to more than one genre, showing that these genres I have laid out are not mutually exclusive. As I went through the set of 140 threads, I made notes on which had the most prominent aspects related to their respective genres, essentially using this as a basis for an iterative set of codes. By doing this, I was searching for evidence of how and why certain parts of an LP were made the way they were, and what this could show about both the creator and the audience.

Ultimately, I wanted to select a small, representative list of threads, so that each of the major genres were included, and that I could read through or view to generate more detailed analysis. I settled on 7 threads, which provided enough variety to represent the major genres and from different time periods in the subforum's history. After all, part of my research focus was to present a historical accounting of the subforum, and how it may have changed over 14 years. I go into more detail of the specific threads and my reasoning for choosing them in Chapter 6, as I will just be discussing the methods of coding and analysis here. I was making notes during my observations through the method of reflexive thematic coding, as I was "reflecting on [my] assumptions, treating [myself] as the first object of study… to acknowledge what [I] brought to the interpretation" (Terry and Hayfield, 2021, 10).

The use of reflexive thematic analysis still fit within the constructionist strategy, even if I was including my own interpretations as part of the process, as it was important for me to be conscious of how my own context, as a past participant of the LP subforum and as a researcher today, influenced my findings and interpretations. In essence, I had to become another of the social actors whose accounts would construct my understanding of the social reality of Let's Play.

My next task, once I had found the most suitable threads for closer reading, was to immerse myself in the data and build rich observational notes on them. In the next section, I go over the process I used for observing and reporting on the chosen LPs.

3.2.3.3 Thematic Coding and Analysis

With the 7 threads I would be closely analysing selected, the next step was to actually read/watch the LPs. In order to effectively manage my time, I restricted myself to viewing only a portion of the content of the chosen LPs, as watching some of them in their entirety would take several hours. I did not expect that I would have any extraordinary observations made in the tenth hour of watching an LP, that I did not already have after the first. Therefore, for video LPs, I watched and took notes on the first video update, and for the screenshot LPs, I would read between two to five updates (depending on the length of each update).

My process for making notes and observations for the LPs was mostly similar for both video and screenshot LPs. My goal was to identify elements in them that stood out as important in regards to what the LPer included in their content. The reasoning here is that, going from the constructionist framework as previously described, an LP can be seen as an account from the LPer on the game, and their presentation of the game in the LP can be used to construct a new understanding of it. In that way, I took meticulous notes on any aspect that related to this, either in terms of what was being shown visually, or what the LPer was saying in their commentary. For video LPs, I would watch each video at least twice, pausing to take notes on what was happening and who was speaking, including timestamps so that I could easily refer to them later on. For screenshot LPs, I took notes on what elements of gameplay were being included in the screenshots, and how the text commentary framed those elements. I was looking to see if there was a difference between how a game visually appeared in the LP, and how the context could be changed by the addition of the LPer's commentary.

From these notes I put together a set of important codes, which I could use to sort and draw connections between my observations. The next step I took was to convert those codes into thematic elements, which I list in the short table below.

Table 3: Codes/Themes developed in Study 3

Code/Theme
Technical Focus
Game Mastery
Game Criticism
Schadenfreude
Gameplay Recontextualization
Ludic Participation
Creative Participation

The full explanation of these coded themes can be found in Chapter 6. The main quality that justifies including these themes is that they contribute to an LP by augmenting or altering the gameplay experience of the chosen game. When present in an LP, each of them adds something noteworthy to the LP, such that the LP becomes significantly different from the original game. This manifests by presenting the game in a new way (Game Mastery, Technical Focus, Gameplay Recontextualization), drawing attention to certain design elements through commentary (Game Criticism, Schadenfreude), or by bringing in the audience to collaborate on making the LP itself (Ludic/Creative Participation).

3.2.3.4 Ethical Concerns

As discussed in section 3.2.3.1, most of the initial dataset used in Study 3 was metadata collected in Study 2, and was largely disconnected from any personal/identifying details. While the later analysis of the selected threads meant that the authors' usernames were brought up, all of the information was publicly available through the LP Archive or the original threads themselves. Further, since the overall focus of this study was to understand the content of LPs, there was not as much detail needed on the particular individuals involved. Who contributed to an LP mattered less than what was contributed in the first place.

3.3 Conclusion and Reflections

In this chapter I have provided an overview of the ontological and epistemological assumptions used in designing the methods and methodology for my research. I have

described how the methods used in each of the three studies I did relate to the overall research strategy, and justified their use. In the next chapter, I will go over the first study, with an introduction to the previously published paper on it.

Chapter 4: Interviews with Let's Players

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I present the first research study conducted for my thesis. As noted in my literature review, one of the issues with previous work on Let's Plays is most were limited in scope, and rarely examined the original SA LP subforum. While some scholars have conducted interviews with members of the LP community, these have narrow focus only present information from a small sample of Let's Players. In order to meaningfully contribute to this field of research, and to help guide later studies in my work, the first major research task I conducted was interviewing over 30 members of the SA LP subforum, so as to provide a more comprehensive account of the origins of the phenomenon. Using the abductive/constructionist methods of research, this study was designed to be open ended, both in the questions posed during the interviews, and in the analysis that came afterward. This was done to allow important concepts related to the SA LP subforum to naturally develop through semi-structured conversations with engaged participants.

4.2 Prior Publication

This chapter was originally published in the journal *Games and Culture* in 2022. The published version of the text is replicated here.

4.3 How does this paper contribute to the thesis?

One of the primary research questions of this thesis was "What motivates people to participate in the LP community?" At the time when this study was conducted, my research questions were still developing, and so there are some minor differences in how they are structured in the published version. In order to answer this question, this study was designed to interview members of the LP subforum, so as to discover what aspects of LPs motivated them to participate. Using an abductive framework, as described by Blaikie in *Designing Social Research*, the main goal of this paper was to "discover everyday lay concepts, meanings, and motives" from the members of the LP community (84).

4.4 "What are you bringing to the Table?": The *Something Awful* Let's Play Community as a Serious Leisure Subculture

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Abstract

Within the last decade, Let's Plays, recordings of gameplay with commentary by the person playing, have grown in popularity and attention. The current research examining Let's Plays has focused on the contemporary popularity of the phenomenon on YouTube. However, the origins of Let's Plays as an influential media practice have not been fully investigated. In order to address this gap, we conducted a series of interviews with 34 creators from the *Something Awful* LP subforum—commonly identified to have originated the media form. Transcripts of these interviews were analysed using concepts of serious leisure studies and cultural/subcultural capital. As a form of serious leisure culture, the members of the *Something Awful* LP community displayed motivations related to extrinsic and intrinsic rewards, such as increased sense of self-worth and recognition. The analysis of this Serious leisure culture highlights how this subculture was subsequently adopted by larger YouTube communities.

Keywords

digital ethnography, Let's play, video games, game studies, serious leisure, cultural capital

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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, Nadji, Mynatt, and Bruckman, 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 SA LP) subforum. The findings from these 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 SA LP subforum that reflect serious leisure behaviours 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 and Miller (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 (Beil et al., 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 (Oberg, 2021).

These texts, however, are predominantly focused on LPs on YouTube, and do not provide context for how LPs moved from the SA LP subforum to wider popularity on YouTube. Most texts merely mention the origins of LPs on the SA LP subforum, without examining how the forums acted upon the practices and behaviours of LPers.[4] In order to address this gap, this paper focuses on the activities and experiences of early LPers on the SA LP subforum. While the first LPs were posted on the main Games forum of *Something Awful*, the SA LP subforum started in 2007 and provided a central location for discussion threads. Even today, the SA LP 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 SA LP 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 centred 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 endeavour, 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 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, Kurth, Schloder, and Cyr, 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 SA LP 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 SA LP 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 SA LP 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 SA LP subforum providing the "niche" or subculture. Historically speaking, however, the roles of these two cultures were originally reversed, as the SA LP subforum once served as the dominant place to find LPs. Up until LPs became massively popular on YouTube, the SA LP 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, 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 SA LP Archive,[5] period of time they were active on the SA LP subforum, and availability of contact information for recruitment. We examined the SA LP 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, Guest, Bunce, and Johnson, 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 an LP on the SA LP subforum. That way, we can be certain that the people we interviewed were engaged enough in the serious leisure community to commit to finishing an 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 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 SA LP 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 totalling almost 2 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.

Pseudonym of participant	**Estimated period of activity on SA LP**
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

Table 1: List of 34 participant pseudonyms and periods of involvement in SA LP. Information about when they were active in SA LP and when they left is based on their recollections within the interviews and our estimates on their last LP threads in the SA LP 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 analysed them in reference to the concepts of serious leisure and subcultural capital.

Reasons for Joining SA LP

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 SA LP 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 SA LP 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 SA LP 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 SA LP 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, Possler, and Klimmt, 2021, pg. 1036), but in the context of an LP community like the SA LP 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 SA LP 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 SA LP 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 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 SA LP 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 SA LP 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 I ... Whoever's doing the stream has to stop and 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" (Guidenable, 2013). While veterans among the community may view

monetization as cheapening the medium, they do not 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 SA LP 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 does not 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 SA LP 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 SA LP. 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 SA LP 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 off- site 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 6 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 favourite 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). 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 behaviours 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 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, an 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 SA LP 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 could not 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 ... 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 behaviour 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 SA LP 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 SA LP 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 SA LP 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 behavioural 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 SA LP 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 SA LP subforum have constructed a shared cultural identity that is still evolving, and now operates as a niche subculture vis-a`-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.

Notes

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)/
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 SA LP 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 SA LP 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 SA LP subforum community.
5. https://lparchive.org/
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/
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.
9. The current thread for feedback is found here: https://forums.somethingawful.com/showthread.php?threadid=3790126

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4.5 Connections to This Thesis

Beyond discovering the personal motivations of individual members of the SA LP subforum, the results from this study provided direction for the next stage of research, as multiple participants discussed specific LPs that they felt were significant. This meant we had an initial indication of what kinds of LP threads were seen as most valuable or popular within the community. In general, the participants emphasized the novel experiences that came from an LP, in that they most enjoyed an LP when it provided a different experience than playing it themselves. Their responses also reflected the nature of participatory cultures, as previously examined by Albrechtslund (2010), in the kinds of fan made texts that the participants valued highly from the community. There was a roughly equal number of participants who indicated that they joined the subforum because of informative LPs, which would be considered instrumental productivity, as those that pointed to more casual forms of LPs motivating them, which Albrechtslund would view as expressive (2010). For the participants, it was not necessarily as important who the LPer that made the content was, but there was a definite sense that some LPers specialized in particular styles or kinds of LP, which meant their audience could then look forward to future content in the same genre. I will be going into further detail on the different styles and genres of LPs in Chapter 6.

Another aspect of the responses that reflects previous literature on online communities is that of conforming to communal norms. While the rules of LP content for the subforum are not necessarily about the discussions and comments people make in the threads, they do concern the kind of content that is the focus of those threads. Some participants reported that they were hesitant to post in threads, simply because they did not feel like their comments would have a meaningful contribution to the thread. This is somewhat mirrored by findings from Allison and Bussey, where people in some online communities "were deterred from posting by a perceived inability to live up to [those] standards" (2020, 17). This social pressure may have stifled newcomers from contributing to the LP subforum, beyond lurking and consuming LP content. I discuss these pressures, and the gatekeeping reputation the SA forums developed partially because of them, later in Chapter 7. Many of the interviewees also talked about the community rules and behaviours, which, like the personal motivations of LPers, had been largely absent from discussions in the existing literature. Therefore, as I will cover in the following chapter, the next step was to develop a better understanding of the

community overall, and what elements of the subforum were needed for the members to be highly engaged in LPs.

Chapter 5: The Community of Let's Play

5.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter I discussed the people that make Let's Plays, and their motivations for engaging with the phenomenon. Now, in this chapter, I will address the LP community itself, in terms of the different trends in LPing that drive the most engagement from community members.

This paper was originally published as a journal article in *Internet Histories* in 2022. Data collection was done from the end of 2021 to around March 2022, before the article was written up, submitted, and revised as needed.

5.1.2 Collection Methods

One thing to note before reading the original paper is the deviation from the dedicated qualitative methods used in the previous chapter. I discussed this in detail in section 3.2, but in order to better direct the investigation during this study, I utilized a mixed methods approach in a sequential fashion (Cresswell, 2003, 16), using data analysis methods more in common with quantitative studies. These results were examined in the context of constructionist thinking, so as to develop a more detailed picture of the cultural contexts that the LP subforum has evolved.

5.2 Let's Play Something Awful: A Historical Analysis of 14 Years of Threads

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Let's Play *Something Awful*: A Historical Analysis of 14 Years of Threads

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ABSTRACT

The *Something Awful* Let's Play subforum is widely acknowledged as the birthplace of the Let's Play (LP) media phenomenon. LPs typically involve people recording themselves playing games while providing commentary. LPs are an important media form in themselves as well as being an important antecedent to many contemporary and popular media forms such as live streaming, esports and speedrunning. An examination of the *Something Awful* LP subforum can contribute to an understanding of the origins of LPs and the community that created them. In this paper, we report on a study of the *Something Awful* LP subforum and describe the kinds of engagement the community participates in the top threads, as well as looking to see if there are specific individuals responsible for guiding the subforum overall. We collected data from the thousands of public threads posted in the LP subforum, from its inception in 2007 to the end of 2020. The analysis of these postings presented in this paper draws on previous under- standings of the behavioural roles, forms of engagement, and policing of practices that often occur on internet forums as part of the regulation and organization of associated online communities. Our results show that the LP subforum was not dominated by a small minority of users that dictated the community's LP posting, recording and commentary practices, and that the content of the specific threads was much more important in determining what forms of LPs became popular.

Introduction

Originating around 2005, Let's Plays (or LPs) have become a popular form of user-generated online media, with LP channels on YouTube occupying several spots in the top ten most subscribed channels. Let's Plays are recordings of gameplay with commentary from the person playing the game. The first LPs started around 2005 (Klepek, 2015) on the forums of the comedy website *Something Awful*. LPs then spread out and grew, with many of the most popular channels on YouTube featuring some form of LP content. Much of the existing literature on LPs focuses on how they function on YouTube (Burwell and Miller, 2016; Ruiz Segarra, 2018; Kreissl et al., 2021). However, there has not been much scholarly work on the origins of LPs, with only a few texts discussing *Something Awful* beyond a simple acknowledgement as the source of LPs (Hale, 2013; Ligman, 2011).

This article contributes to the existing body of literature on Let's Plays and online communities by looking at the developmental history of the *Something Awful* LP subforum, and how the behavioural patterns of content creation from it contributed to the evolution of later forms of LPs and related online media, such as e-sports and livestreaming. Drawing on quantitative analysis of LP threads from the subforum's archives, we describe the common elements of the threads, including posters and comments, based on which threads sustained the most posting activity from members of the subforum. The reason we studied these concepts was to determine what were the dominant forms of participation and engagement with threads on the SA LP subforum, and what aspects of highly active threads contributed to that engagement. This study applies concepts and definitions from previous authors about online forums and communities, using ideas about the social roles and behaviours that members of online communities organize around in order to understand what kinds of LPs or LP threads attract the most attention and engagement within the subforum. As the LP subforum is a creative and active community of creators, we also examined them to see if the individual making a thread was as important as the content of that thread, in determining how popular it would become.

Our primary research goal in this study is to understand the nature of creating and sharing LPs within the context of the subforum, and how different behavioural roles may exist within it. As part of the historical aims of our ongoing research project, we focused on this main research question: What determines the success and level of engagement of an LP thread? From this, we set a few sub-questions that address specific aspects we sought to analyse: Which LP threads generated the most activity in the subforum, and what are the common characteristics of those threads that draw engagement from the community? Does the LP subforum have 'agenda setters,' as previously defined by Graham and Wright (2014)? How might the definition of this role change, based on the specific context of the LP subforum? Considering the similarities and evolutionary ties between Let's Plays, streaming, and e-sports, findings from this work can be applied to online gaming cultural and entertainment groups in future research.

Background

As described previously, Let's Plays (LPs) are recordings of gameplay with commentary from the person playing the game. This definition, which we use throughout the rest of the paper, is intended to be rather broad. LPs do not have to be made from digital video games, nor do they have to use videos as their recording medium. On the *Something Awful* LP Subforum, the earliest LPs only used screenshots, as it took the community some time before they found recording and editing tools that allowed for video LPs. As a brief introduction, *Something Awful* website has existed since 1999, and the comedy news articles and discussion forums have served as the origin of several well-known internet memes and phenomena, such as "All Your Base" and the Slenderman Mythos.

On the SA LP Subforum, an LP is started by the LPer creating a new thread topic. Their opening post often acts as an introduction to the LP and a table of contents for the updates as they post them. Other members of the forums leave posts in the thread, commentating on the LP, the game being played, or just responding to another poster in the thread. Some LPs, as we discuss later in more detail, have the audience in the thread act as decision makers, voting on specific decisions the LPer should make in

the game. The only barrier to participating in the discussion is having a *Something Awful* account. While anyone can read the most recent threads without serious issue, a basic account is required to post anything in the threads.

Let's Plays and the communities that produce them have been studied before, though there is something of a gap when considering the original LP subforum. While many texts acknowledge the SA LP subforum as the birthplace of the phenomenon, it is necessary to provide more context on how online forums communities operate, to fully comprehend the characteristics of the SA LP community and how it generated sustained participation and commitment to shaping the evolution of this phenomenon of gameplay activity. As mentioned previously, much of the existing literature has examined LPs in the context of YouTube, which, while completely valid for understanding mainstream LPs in general, presents an issue when considering the SA LP subforum. Namely, the fundamental systems for communication between the LPer and their audience are very different for the two platforms. Without this important context in mind, previous authors had credited that the predominant strength of an LPer lies in their personality and performance (Nguyen, 2016), but we theorize that this may not hold true for the LP subforum in particular. As the metrics for determining which LPs or LPers achieve success are rather unknown (when compared to YouTubers), we could not assume that the same patterns of success for YouTube LPers would translate exactly to the SA LP subforum. Other texts focus on specific behaviours of select individuals as YouTube LPers (Beers Fägersten and Beers Fägersten, 2017), or use LPs as a method for studying a separate subject entirely (Piittinen, 2018). While these highlight the different ways in which LPs can be applied to understanding academic fields of study, they don't adequately provide a foundational structure for examining LPs themselves.

More broadly, previous research into online communities has approached the subject by examining the social roles and behaviours that members of the communities adopt. Various authors have studied the role of engagement in forming communities (Ray et al., 2014), the benefits for the well-being of individuals who participate in online communities (Pendry and Salvatore, 2015), and the specific behaviours of members that sustain the online community (Butler et al., 2007). For our research of the LP subforum, we sought out texts on the kinds of roles and behaviours that drive the development of an online community over time. In particular, we focused on the dominant posters in

the community in order to understand who and how these dominant community members shaped the forms and norms of this cultural and community practice. In focusing on dominant posters, we drew on *Discursive Equality and Everyday Talk Online* (2014), in which Graham and Wright summarized previous texts on online forums and which members contributed to ongoing discussions, finding that "a highly active minority would appear to be the norm and is an extension of the 1/9/90 rule, which predicts that only 1% of users of a forum actually post, with 90% lurking and 9% editing" (2014, pg. 3). It is important to acknowledge the parts of an online community that may not be uncovered or reflected in quantitative studies such as this, as lurkers do not have an appreciable presence outside of page views.

Based on the literature they reviewed on models of online communities, Graham and Wright found, "there is a lack of agreement – and often a lack of specificity to theoretical models – as to what constitutes an active (or dominant) minority, and this makes it difficult to observe and interpret such behaviour in practice" (2014, pg. 4). Their argument, thus, is to focus on those members of an online community whose behaviour can be most easily measured, also known as super-participants. One of the main categories of super-participant they defined, which we will be using in this paper, is the agenda setter. They based the definition of this term on the number of posts or threads a user creates in a given community.

They start by discussing previous work on Usenet forums by Himelboim et al. (2009), where individuals acted as 'discussion catalysts' that spark larger debates. Graham and Wright state that "creating new seed posts does not guarantee that they will receive responses, or that people will interpret – uptake – the message as intended" (2014, pg. 8). They define agenda-setters as individuals who created at least 200 threads, based on their previous observations of thread creation. Agenda-setters serve as catalysts, leading discussions within the message threads that they start. As they were writing from a political science perspective, Graham and Wright were using this concept to demonstrate how ideological ideas might be spread in online spaces, by members of the community that occupy these roles. However, Graham and Wright do not go into any further detail on how to account for different forum sizes for agenda-setters. Theoretically, older forums communities would have greater numbers of threads, which would mean there would be more members who had made more than 200 threads.

Part of our research explored how other authors defined online communities and their members. In *Modelling and Analysis of User Behaviour in Online Communities*, Angeletou et al also provide a set of definitions for understanding how online community members behave. They note that "number and frequency of posting are often used as an index of community health," and that "having lurkers in a community does not necessarily have a negative influence" (Angeletou et al., 2011). They chose an Irish community discussion forum to test the models, capturing data over three years. While their work did not seek to create a standardized list of behaviour types to measure, their aim was "to demonstrate a semantic model for representing and inferring behaviour of online community members" (Angeletou et al., 2011). In their analysis, they found that healthy communities contained more celebrity or elitist/popular participants, and that a mix of popular and unpopular roles increased overall community health (2011, pg. 48). In previous research into the LP subforum (McKitrick et al., 2022), where researchers interviewed members from it, participants reported elements of these ideas, where certain LPers were viewed as 'celebrities.' However, because of how specific Angeletou's choice in case study was, the models they used to determine which members were popular do not directly translate to the LP sub-forum. Our analysis thus used this work as a basis for our own method of determining popular and unpopular members on the subforum, as a way of analysing which members of the community determined the popular styles of LP content and threads. A more recent paper on forms of online participation comes from Grace and Fonseca, which studied the asymmetry of different forms of participation in social media spaces (Grace and Fonseca, 2019). In their work, they lay out a four-part typology of participatory asymmetry: broadcast, feedback, moderated, and dialogic. The definitions for these terms are based on the dimension of how frequent a participant was (sporadic vs. regular), the pattern of interaction they took part in (1-to-1 and 1-to-many), and the dynamics of how users curate the social media spaces (aggregation and articulation). While the typologies they provide may not directly line up with the structure of the *Something Awful* forums, as they analysed an online learning website and discussion board, we used their findings to inform some of the patterns of behaviour we would find in the LP subforum. We expected that, based on the definition of an LP, where the LPer shares their content with an audience in the thread, most of the interactions would be 'broadcasts,' where 1-to-many

communications happen between a regular participant (the LPer) and their audience of sporadic participants.

Threads also provide a space for 'moderation' and 'dialogic' types of interaction, where the LPer responds directly to questions and comments from the thread audience. An important factor to keep in mind for analysing the *Something Awful* LP sub- forum is the nature of SA culture itself. Pater et al studied the forums of SA to determine their success and longevity, despite how they appeared to go against the normal practices of online communities in general (2014). During their study, they found several ways in which the SA forums deviated from normal practices of maintaining an online community. One of the key findings of SA posting culture, they explain, is how they heavily penalize low content posts, which "has created a culture that focuses on the quality of the content that keeps members engaged with the community" (Pater et al., 2014, pg. 2409). On the LP subforum, this is reflected in the rules for posting new LPs on the subforum, as they emphasize putting in effort into making the content of the LP interesting for other members:

> Above all else, show us you give a damn! The internet-wide LP landscape has changed, a lot, since this subforum got started, but we still presume to have standards. Don't just post a link to your channel and be done with it. Threads that are barebones, transparently farming for reputation or exposure, or otherwise just plain insincere are liable to be gassed. There's no hard and fast rules on how to run a thread, but one way or another, if you put in effort (or don't), it will show in the end. (Fedule, n.d.)

Methods

In this paper, we document the results of our mixed methods study, which combined a custom data scraper with qualitative analysis of targeted groups of threads identified by the scraper.

Table 1. Files generated by data scraper and data points within each document.

Document Name	Data Collected by Scraper
Thread Summary	• Thread titles

	• Thread rating
	• Number of votes (for the rating)
	• Name of thread creator (OP)
	• Date of first post
	• Date of last post
	  ○ Age of thread
	• Number of unique posters
	• Number of total posts in thread
	• Number of posts by thread creator
	  ○ Average posts per unique poster
	  ○ Average posts per day
	  ○ Ratio of total posts to OP posts
	  ○ Percentage of total posts made by OP

Top Posters	• Thread title • Names of the top ten users who made the most posts in the thread (ranked) ○ Number of posts each user made in the thread
Original Posters	• Names of thread creators (OP) • Number of threads created by each OP
Posting Frequency	• Thread title • Number of new posts made in the thread, recorded for every week between start and end of thread.

Data collection

As the first step in this study, we utilized a custom-made data scraper to collect and analyse data from 14 years of the LP subforum threads. We collected data from the scraped threads to facilitate further analysis. The data we used for analysis scraped the subforum from its start in 2007 to January 2021. The data scraper we used collected the relevant data (as displayed in Table 1) and provided it to us in four separate files, from which additional data points were derived and included. These data sets were used to generate aggregate information, and both sets of data were used in our analysis. The

Thread Summary file contained most of the data points, although not all of them were used in our analysis. Because of how the forums display information, the scraper could only collect data on the rating and number of votes if the thread was rated at or above 4.5 out of 5, and if there were 20 or more votes cast. This meant that only a small number of threads had ratings we could record, and therefore this information could not be used meaningfully. The other data points, by comparison, proved much more useful. Being able to know the number of unique posters in each thread allowed us to see which threads attracted more members of the subforum community. Additionally, by differentiating between the number of posts in a thread made by the original poster (or OP, a common term used by the community to refer to thread creators) and posts by everyone else, we can see how much effort the creator of an LP thread might have to apply, to act as that seed catalyst for extensive discussions.

The Top Poster dataset included the names and number of posts made by the top ten most active posters in each thread. This information was collected to show pat- terns in how members of the subforum participated in threads, as well as to find super-posters and agenda-setters. As the definition of a super-poster is based on the proportional number of posts made by an individual in any given thread, it was necessary for us to find which individuals were most active in every LP thread. We then could count users who appeared most frequently in the top rankings across all threads, to see if there was a minority group that contributed more than anyone else to discussions on the subforum.

The scraper also output data on the Original Posters of the subforum. This data set has the names of every thread creator and the number of threads that they started. Originally, we wanted to see which members of the subforum could be considered agenda-setters. However, the highest number of threads started was 87, much lower than the 200 defined by Graham and Wright (2014). Therefore, to more accurately measure what an agenda-setter looks like on the LP subforum, we needed to compare the number of threads created with the number of posts and unique posters in those threads. Our reasoning was that, if an OP were to provide an engaging/ entertaining LP thread, the volume of messages from other posters in the thread would be much higher than one that did not attract any attention. Ultimately, the Original Posters data set

could not be analysed by itself, but it did provide useful context for interpreting other data points collected.

The Posting Frequency data set collected data on how many new posts were made in each thread during a set period. We set the scraper to record how many new posts were made for each thread in increments of weeks and months. This data was collected to track the history of posting activity of the subforum over time, identifying periods of high and low activity. Our reasoning was that this information would give us a way to compare the subforum with other LP communities elsewhere, by allowing us to see the general trends in contemporary events going on at the same time.

As part of the coding process for the data collected, we coded certain threads to indicate special types of threads present in the data. Threads that were for the rules of LP, general discussion of LPs, technical support and feedback, and any other threads that were not about LPs specifically were identified this way. This was done to maintain accurate statistics on the rest of the LP threads, as the coded threads did not fit the typical patterns of the rest.

As part of our method of identifying the most active LP threads over the history of the subforum, we selected the 20 LP threads with the most posts made in them. We chose these threads as a starting point for iterative qualitative analysis, to find out which aspects of these threads, if any, did they share. Our reasoning was that, by doing this, we would be able to see if there was a pattern of behaviours or small group of individuals that were responsible for the more popular forms of LPs. During our data collection and analysis, we made sure to examine the different types of threads and thread engagement, so that we could better understand the ways in which the community participated in these threads. Additionally, since our data set covered the full history of the subforum up until December 2020, we also would be able to see if those commonalities and types of engagement had changed over time.

Analysis and discussion

Historical activity of LP threads

In the first part of our results analysis, we describe data on the overall trends in

thread creation on the subforum, as it is important to illustrate the larger context for data we discuss later in this article.

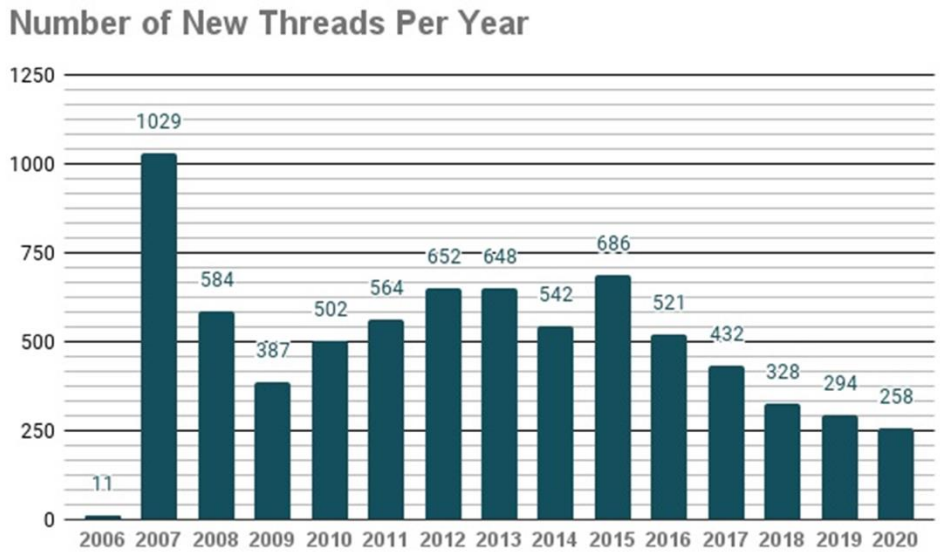


Figure 1. Number of threads created in the LP subforum each year.

We examined the collected data by looking at the number of new threads created in each year, to gain an understanding of the history of participation and popularity of the forum. Our analysis showed that over a thousand threads were created in 2007. This is the highest number of new threads in a single year, with at most 686 in any subsequent year. However, this number includes threads that were ongoing at the time the subforum was created, as they originally were posted in the main Games forum. When the subforum was created, all ongoing LP threads were moved over from the main Games forum. The move from the larger forum, and the introduction of new rules for posting LPs in the sub- forum, are the most probable explanation for these figures, as they likely decreased the number of goons (a common term used to refer to members of *Something Awful*) interested in starting new LP threads.

From this data we can see a trend in the level of activity for the subforum over time, based on the number of new threads. After 2008, the number of new threads steadily increased, before reaching their peak in 2015. From then on, new LP threads started to decline, with 2020 having only 258 new threads, not even half of the peak in 2015. What caused this decline is unclear, and is largely dependent on the context surrounding the subforum at those times. One possible explanation is the formation

of splinter LP groups, drawing members away from the subforum. Another reason might be a change in the culture of *Something Awful*, which drove away goons who did not agree with it. Further research is required to accurately determine the cause of this, however. In brief, we used the data presented in Figure 1 to build the context we used for the rest of our analysis.

Completeness and longevity of LP threads

Our next step in analysis was to examine exceptional threads in our collected data. It was important to look at these threads in particular to understand what elements are shared between them, which we can use to explain differences between other threads.

Table 2. Data on the most active completed LP threads (LP threads that were still active at time of data collection and analysis or had been abandoned/left incomplete were excluded).

Thread Title	Original Poster (OP)	Start – End Date of Thread	Total Posts in Thread	Number of Unique Posters	Game/Type of Game LPed
Lets All Play Battletech and rewrite Inner Sphere history	PoptartsNinja	21/1/2011 to 17/6/2018	83479	692	Battletech system (Collaborative*)
Super High-school Level Let's Play Dangan Ronpa!	Orenronen	5/11/2011 to 29/5/2013	29632	1530	*Danganronpa: Trigger Happy Havoc* (Spike, PSP, 2010)
This thread are sick – Let's Play Final Fantasy VII!	Elentor	29/5/2011 to 13/9/2016	26218	1512	*Final Fantasy VII* (Square, Playstation, 1997)
Islam is the Light: Azerbaijan Paradox Mega-LP	Wiz	4/8/2011 to 26/1/2015	20300	847	Paradox Games (*Crusader Kings 1, Europa Universalis III, March of the Eagles, Victoria 2)* **
War in the Pacific – Day by Day	Grey Hunter	7/12/2009 to 20/3/2014	20052	533	*War in the Pacific* (Matrix games, PC, 2004)
A peaceful tropical vacation with Super Dangan Ronpa 2	orenronen	11/12/2012 to 8/9/2014	18631	1515	*Danganronpa 2: Goodbye Despair* (Spike Chunsoft, PSP, 2012)

War in the Pacific Day by Day – Imperial Edition	Grey Hunter	7/12/2015 to 10/10/2019	17548	477	*War in the Pacific (*Matrix games, PC, 2004)
Pokemon Reborn: It's Dork and Edgy ***	Orange Fluffy Sheep	10/5/2018 to 9/11/2019	16087	582	Pokemon fangame (Amethyst, PC, 2020

*: not actually an LP of a specific Battletech video game, but rather a narrative set in the fictional universe, where goons in the thread collaborated to create a new narrative.

**: narrative LP that played as a dynasty from 1187 to 1936, using several games all published by Paradox Interactive.

***: the thread title for *Pokemon Reborn* changed multiple times, and it was difficult to find a complete list of all titles it had. The title the thread had when it ended will be used in this article.

We searched for qualities of threads including, but not limited to, the kinds of game being played, the types of interactions the LPer had with their audience in the thread, how long a thread was open for, and how the audience reacted to the game itself in the thread. Table 2 provides a sample of the most active LP threads, based on the total post count of each. Threads in this sample were included if they contained a single, completed LP. This excluded a few threads with similarly high post counts, as they were either not LP threads (such as feedback and non-LP discussion threads) or had been left incomplete/abandoned. We chose to exclude incomplete LP threads in order to capture data on the full life-cycle of an LP thread. If we were to include LP threads left unfinished, it would be necessary to manually identify when these threads actually stopped, which is not immediately obvious from the data alone. The point at which an OP stops updating their thread could be several months before the last post is ever made in a thread, and we would not be able to adequately examine these threads alongside completed LPs. Further, we provide this sample to illustrate some of the reasons why LP threads draw active engagement from members of the subforum. It is not intended to be indicative of all LP threads in general, as these threads are somewhat exceptional outliers, by the fact that they have post counts many times that of the average thread. A full, in depth analysis of every thread ever made in the subforum would require time and effort not available to us.

From initial observations, the longevity of an LP thread is a possible reason for higher

participation from the goons. The top thread in our sample, *Let's All Play Battletech and rewrite Inner Sphere History!* By PoptartsNinja, ran for seven years. However, simply running for a long time does not necessarily attract goons to post in the thread. What drives the posting activity, in this LP thread especially, appears to be an open invitation for the audience to participate. In the Battletech LP thread, instead of playing a specific game, PoptartsNinja set up series of skirmishes using the rules system for Battletech. Goons in the thread then applied to be mech pilots, giving orders each turn, while the LPer played the opposition. In between skirmishes, PoptartsNinja would have in-fiction political sessions, where Goons would roleplay as various members of the factions of the Inner Sphere. Thus, after seven years of running the LP thread, the goons who had participated had created a new canon for Battletech. We see in this example that, by giving members of the subforum a measure of authorship in an LP, the LP thread was more likely to have higher activity and run for longer, as the audience becomes much more invested in the outcome of the LP.

Understanding engagement on LP threads

Not all LP threads have elements of audience participation, however, so we cannot think of all LP threads in this context. Other highly active threads in our sample were successful based on the kinds of games they chose to play. The second and sixth entries in Table 2, both LP threads by orenronen, are of the first two entries in a Playstation Portable series of Japanese murder-mystery visual novels. What sets these LPs apart from other LPs in general is how they were presented. The first game, *Danganronpa: Trigger Happy Havoc*, was released in Japan in 2010, and was not localized into English until 2014. The LP by orenronen, however, started in 2011, and they translated the entire game as they made the LP. This meant that the LP was the only complete English translation of the game available for years. Orenronen did a similar translation LP of the second game as well, starting the LP thread for it in 2012 (the same year the game was released) and finishing the LP the same year the English version was released (2014). This leads us to what we consider to be the two main reasons why the two LP threads were very active, with much higher numbers of unique posters, even when compared to other threads in our sample, taking part.

First, by translating a game for a primarily English-speaking audience, like the LP

subforum, there were few, if any, goons who were already familiar with the game. This gave the LP a sense of novelty, as it was something new to the subforum, and could bring in curious goons on this novelty alone. Second, as the games have murder-mystery narratives, there is plenty of opportunity for speculation and debate about who the culprit was and how they did it. Upon sample readings of posts within these threads, we found many of the posts were just that: goons going over clues and character dialogue, trying to sus out the culprit. In summary, one of the ways in which LP threads can thrive and be active is by playing games that are well-suited for discussions. This can be done by selecting a game with some sort of ambiguity in its narrative (a mystery to solve or puzzles to work out), or by showcasing a game that is relatively obscure to the community in general.

The novelty could also come from the way in which the LP was presented, as seen in the entries for *War in the Pacific* by Grey Hunter in this sample. The premise of those threads was that the LPer would post updates for each simulated day in the Pacific Theatre of the game, which is why both threads lasted at least four years before completion.

The last entry In Table 2, the LP thread for *Pokemon Reborn*, presents a different kind of thread, and the reasons why goons participated in it are also much different. Reading the thread (as well as referring to anecdotes from participants interviewed in a previous study) suggests that the game itself was bad. Almost every element put on display in the LP was met negatively by the LPer and goon audience, and much of the thread was spent making jokes about the experience. Thus, we find another way that LP threads can attain high levels of activity, which is by criticizing (in this case, more akin to tearing down) the design of the game being played. While less common than other LP threads in general, LPs of bad games seem to be opportunities for goons to derive entertainment at the expense of something else, usually either the game being played (because it is so bad) or the person playing the game (because they play it so the audience does not have to). In other LP threads for bad games not included in our samples above, we found more constructive forms of criticism and critique to be found, suggesting that LPers and their audiences can be more reflective on game design elements than one might initially assume. Therefore, this type of LP thread can provide insight into not just the cultural habits of the subforum, by showing what kinds of

games or elements of games they find displeasing, but also into how player audiences perceive game design systems. From our reading of the thread, there were several points in the discussion as to what could be changed to improve the game. While not necessarily coming from experienced game designers, having such direct feedback could prove valuable for game designers and developers in general.

Overall, from the threads described here, we discovered a few of the ways in which LP threads have been able to attract audiences, by having audience participation, some novel or new elements to present, or by providing an opportunity to collaboratively critique a game. While this does not necessarily provide an explanation for all LP threads in general, we can use these findings for future research into other threads, as well as LPs from outside the subforum.

Posting behaviours on the LP subforum

In this section we discuss the posting habits of the goons on the LP subforum. By analysing this information, we looked to see if there was a minority group of posters who dominated the discussion within the threads. From the data we collected on the most active posters in each LP thread, we checked to see if the OP of any given thread was more or less likely to also be the most active poster in their own threads. Our reasons for examining this was to find any further evidence that OPs were controlling the discussions in threads they started. We found that, across all LP threads scraped, the OP was also the top poster in 83.7% of them, leaving only 16.3% of threads where someone else posted more than the OP. However, when we compared this information to the percentage of posts in a thread made by the OP, we saw that OPs did not actually create a greater volume of posts. On average, only 25.36% of the total posts in any thread were made by the OP of that thread. So, while the OP was most likely to post much more than anyone else in their own threads, the number of other goons posting in the thread would outweigh the OP. This indicated that Let's Players serve as catalysts for discussions within their own threads, which makes sense, based on previous passive observation of the subforum. In summary, the posting habits of the LP subforum members seems to indicate that thread creators do not dominate the discussions that happen in their own threads, based on the average percentage of posts made by the OP in any of their threads. This means that the LP

subforum recognizes and supports content creation, with participation open to any member of the community, instead of a small group that dominates the cultural trends.

To better understand the posting habits within any given LP thread, we moved on to examine one that has been mentioned before. We reasoned that using an LP thread that had a great deal of participation from the audience would be useful for finding posting patterns. The previously mentioned *Danganronpa* LP by orenronen had 29632 total posts, with 1530 unique posters. For context, the average number of posts for an LP thread in our data set was 580, with an average of 77 unique posters. This thread was active from 5 November 2011 to 29 May 2013 (571 days), while the average age of an LP thread was 149 days. According to the recorded posting frequencies, September 2012 was the most active month for the *DR 1* LP thread.

Looking at the posting frequencies in Figure 2, there is a huge drop off in the number of posts after November 2012, going from 2371 posts in October, to 572 in November, and 177 in December. It trails off over the next few months, staying under 100 posts until the end in May 2013. This appeared to indicate an end of the LP proper, with the thread staying open for a few last discussions and conclusions. We compared this to the date ranges on the LP Archive, as they list the start and end dates of the LP thread, in addition to the date when it was added to the archive. It might be that LPers who wish to have their LP archived will keep the thread open until the archival is complete. According to the Archive, the LP itself ended on 30 December 2012, but was not added to the Archive until 14 July 2013, matching what we see in Figure 2. In conclusion, thread discussions are most active during the time in which the OP is updating the LP, and die down in the time leading up to archival. While the thread selected for analysis here is not indicative of all LP threads, we can assume that the general ebb and flow of conversation in the thread discussions are similar.

Analysis of thread creation and dominant posters

In this section, we discuss the number of threads created by individuals on the LP subforum. We used this data to understand which members of the subforum were responsible for a majority of created threads. From our data on the Original Posters,

most OPs (1551) only create one LP thread during their time on the subforum, while the highest number of threads created (87) is held by one person.

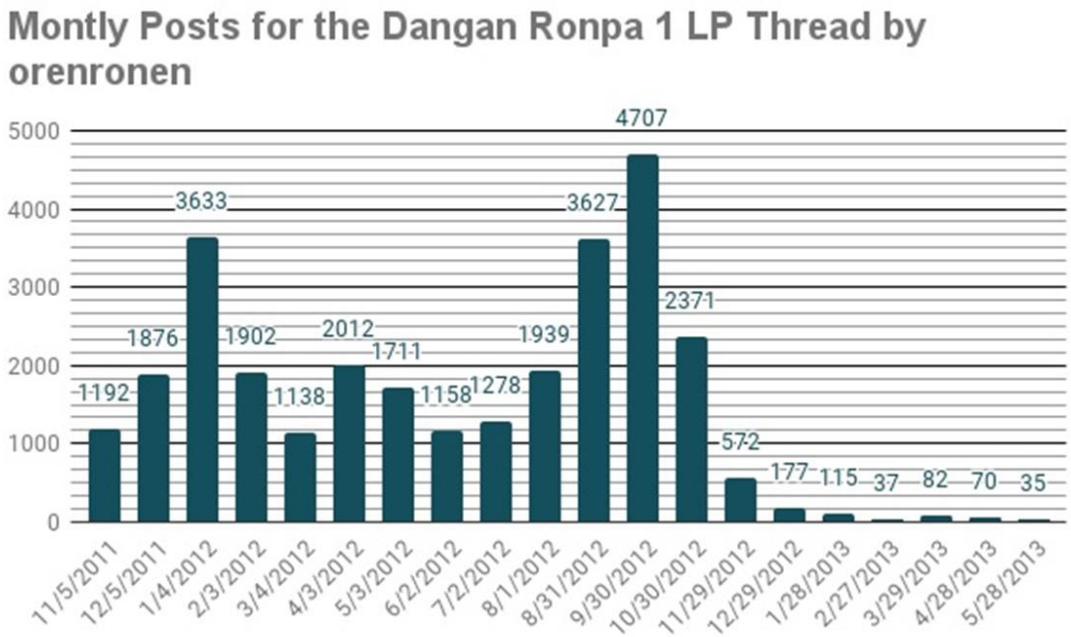


Figure 2. Monthly posts for the LP thread *Super High School Level Let's Play Dangan Ronpa!* by orenronen.

Since this only shows the number of threads created, we cannot determine how many of those LPs were completed without going through and checking each one individually. There are a variety of reasons why an LPer may abandon their thread, such as creative burnout, equipment failure, or changes in the LPer's personal life. Furthermore, this data also does not tell us when an LP was spread across multiple threads. This could happen because someone started a new thread to pick up where they abandoned it, or, for LPs where audience participation is involved and pits goons against each other, multiple threads are made for each side of an LP. For these reasons, the numbers recorded in Figure 3 do not accurately represent how many LPs each OP was responsible for completing. Also, as mentioned as part of our coding process, this data excludes any LPs that were made as part of megathreads with multiple LPers, so the number of LPs each OP created may be higher than what is shown here.

What this data does show is the participatory nature of the LP subforum. Since there

are relatively few barriers to entry in making LPs, there are plenty of individuals who at least try making one. Conversely, unlike what we expected based on the ideas of the agenda-setter, it does not seem like there is a small minority that can claim to have created the majority of threads. We see then that the concept of the agenda-setter is much better suited for the original context it was created for, namely political discussion forums. Within a community that focuses on cultural capital and creative participation, like the LP subforum, the role of an agenda-setter does not appear as influential. From this data we see that a majority of LPers did not make more than one thread, and only 121 individuals out of 2689 OPs (about 4.5%) created more than 10 threads. This suggested that the subforum is a more participatory space, wherein all members can create threads on equal footing. We thus can understand the LP subforum as operating primarily through a form of 'broadcast' asymmetric participation, as described earlier by Grace and Fonseca (2019). However, there is an important context missing from these figures, as they do not show how active those threads actually were.

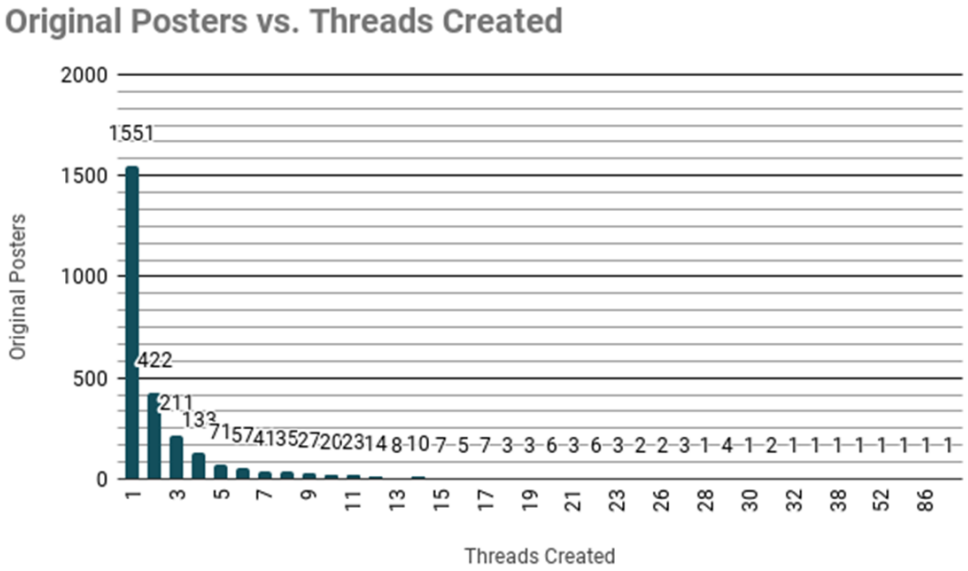


Figure 3. Original Posters and the number of threads they created.

As an example, we looked at the two OPs who created the most threads, forums users 'GamesAreSupernice' (GASN) and 'Grey Hunter' (GH), with 87 and 86 created threads at time of data collection respectively.

As indicated in Table 3, the differences in the top two most active thread creators are

vast. While they are both close in the number of threads created, GH has roughly twice as many posts total in all their threads, seven times the average number of posters taking part in thread discussions, while only contributing about four times as many of their own posts. Just from these two examples, we see that an agenda-setter on the LP subforum cannot be judged on the number of threads they create, as there is no guarantee that there will be a receptive audience for those threads. We also see that threads can offer space for additional forms of asymmetric participation, as the number of other posters in those threads indicates a higher amount of 1-to-1 communication between more sporadic participants. These OPs also differ in how long they have been creating LP threads, as GH has been making LPs for more than twice as long as GASN. When we consider the fact that the percentage of posts made by an OP is generally lower than their audience in a thread, as previously discussed, we can conclude that GASN's threads did not sufficiently engage much of an audience, as their posts made up just over half of all posts in their threads. GH, on the other hand, made about 15% of the posts in their threads, even though their average number of posts per thread was much higher than GASN (1466.4 vs 69.5).

Table 3. Comparison of thread statistics for top two OPs.

	Start date of First Thread (d/m/y)	Average Number of Unique Posters in each thread	Average Number of Posts in each thread	Average Percentage of Total Posts by OP in each thread
GASN	3/1/2016	13.7	69.5	54.48%
GH	1/4/2008	97.8	1466.4	15.15%

While this data does not give any indication of the quality or style of LP content in these threads, based on the statistics here, we theorize that there must be some set of qualities presented by GH in their LP threads that draw greater attention to their work.

Only looking at the two posters with the highest number of created threads is not indicative of the rest of the subforum, however. We semi-randomly selected 10 OPs from our data set who had created between 8 and 10 threads. This was done by taking the OPs that fell within this range, assigning each a number, and using a

random number generator to select from them, ignoring any time a previously selected number came up again. We chose from this range as there were 723 threads created by OPs within this range, representing 10.5% of the 7593 threads scraped. We reasoned that this was enough information to form conclusions about the rest of the threads, without requiring more effort than we could provide, in terms of work hours. As we can see in Table 4, there is a wide range of levels of thread activity even for LPers who have started similar numbers of threads. The standout entry is of PoptartsNinja, who posted their first LP in late 2010. However, a huge portion of those 107953 posts in their threads were made in their second LP thread, which started in January 2011 and ended more than seven years later in June 2018. None of the other LPers measured here had threads that ran as long, and we suspect that such threads are rather rare, no matter who created them. From this data, there does not seem to be a minority group of LPers responsible for dictating the kinds of LP threads that are popular, at least without conducting more close analysis of threads themselves. In conclusion, while we have shown the range of differences in how OPs and their threads are received by the rest of the subforum, our findings showed that we needed a more specific definition of an agenda-setter in the context of the subforum, which we will discuss in the next section.

Agenda-setters of the LP subforum

The definition of agenda-setters seemed applicable to the LP subforum, given its usefulness in studying other online forums and communities, especially those involved in political and news discussions as studies by Graham and Wright, who considered agenda-setters based on a quantitative measure of their posting, defining them as users who have created at least 200 threads (Graham and Wright, 2014).

Table 4. thread statistics for selected thread creators. *:User JamietheD had 10 threads started, one of which was a non-LP thread, so it was not included in these numbers.

	Threads Created	Start Date of First Thread (d/m/y)	Average Number of Unique Posters in each Thread	Average Number of Posts in each thread	Average Percentage of Total Posts by OP in each thread
Opendork	9	21/5/2007	52	286	25.69%
SerCypher	9	6/11/2007	52.2	256.2	23.25%
GuavaMoment	9	11/3/2007	161.4	1178.1	12.03%
FairGame	8	15/11/2007	61.5	612.6	16.73%
PoptartsNinja	10	21/10/2010	200.2	10795.3	15.93%
Haifisch	8	26/7/2011	186.8	3616	11.74%
Coolguye	8	8/7/2011	150.1	1257.9	16.04%
JamieTheD	9*	9/1/2012	39.7	205.7	33.83%
Pythonicus	10	9/1/2012	36.3	159.9	35.02%
Pins	10	19/1/2014	56.6	277.2	16.98%

In our data from the LP subforum, however, the highest number of threads created by any one user is 87. Therefore, in order to adapt the concept of the agenda-setter to the LP subforum, we needed to include additional data beyond a straightforward metric of user created threads, by also accounting for how active a thread was, what the frequency of posts in each was like, and when were the spikes of posting activity, not just the quantity of threads created by the OP. For the LP subforum specifically, we defined an agenda-setter as "any individual that has created at least 8 LP threads with an average audience of at least 50 unique posters, who on average contribute more than 500 posts." Looking at Table 4, by this metric, half of the selected OPs (GuavaMoment, FairGame, PoptartsNinja, Haifisch, and Coolguye) can be counted as agenda-setters. We set the required number of unique posters at 50 as this was the size of audience we observed more active threads as having, who made an average of 500 or more posts in the discussions. Notably, our definition looks for a much lower number of created threads, compared to what was originally defined by Graham and Wright. This is due to the fact that very few OPs create more than ten LP threads, and

no one has yet come close to 200. Thus, our findings are intended to extend the concept of the agenda-setter, to better suit different contexts beyond political discussion communities. The threads on the LP subforum are not discrete topics with specific agendas set by individuals. Instead, they are spaces for a community of cultural participants to actively and creatively respond to content from their peers. These responses then collectively shape the ways in which the community attributes meaning and significance to the original content, without necessarily depending on the individual who originated it to take a leading role in the process.

Conclusion

From our data collection and analysis of the *Something Awful* LP subforum, we found that concepts around behavioural roles developed in research into online communities had to be adapted to explain the results we obtained in relation to this particular community. While it was somewhat true that there was a relatively small minority of members who were responsible for a majority of the thread creation, the characteristics of an agenda-setter were not directly reflected in the LP subforum. We could not accurately identify which individuals were setting the tone and style of LP threads based on the number of threads they created, and thus designed a more explicit set of defining features for use in this community. Our expanded definition includes measures of audience size and level of participation for a given OP. From this, we demonstrated that the content of an LP thread is a key factor in determining whether the rest of the community will take-up and engage with the thread, something which cannot be measured or predicted by numerical data alone. Based on the most active LP threads, the factors that drive participation within our sample appear to be elements of audience participation and novelty in the type of games being played.

Ultimately, the factors that drove the highest engagement in our sample came from the style of the LP thread and type of games being played, rather than the personality playing them. LP threads that incorporated some form of audience input create opportunities for the community to become more personally engaged with the LP. By allowing audience members to collectively shape the ways in which the LP thread progresses, the community/audience is more likely to take part in the

thread discussion, as they then have a measure of authorship in the LP. LP threads that featured games that are relatively unknown within the community also had higher measures of thread engagement. The novelty of a new game experience to share, or one which has a mystery to solve in the thread, is attractive for a more curious audience. Even in the sample we had data on, a game did not have to be completely new or unheard of, as games only available in languages other than English had this novelty. The LP threads in this context are more akin to translation and localization projects than anything else.

While these results may not be indicative of all LP threads in general, they can be used as a comparison point for future studies. Our findings demonstrate that, for smaller communities like the SA LP Subforum, analysing the content of the LPs themselves would be more beneficial for academics trying to understand those communities, instead of the individuals playing the games. We suspect that we would be more likely to find examples of agenda-setters in larger, more mainstream LP and streaming communities, but this was outside the scope of our work, and suggests a fruitful line of investigation for future research. Furthermore, from our examination of a handful of OPs, we understood that there was a limit to this selection. However, analysing more than we have already was outside the scope of this work, but a good starting point for future research would be to examine how many unique OPs created the top 50 or 100 most active threads. Further research is warranted to confirm this, but our findings here provide the first step towards understanding this online community specifically, and other online groups that prioritize creative content generation and sharing.

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5.3 Connections to This Thesis

The findings from this study echoed some of the responses during interviews in Chapter 4, primarily what kinds of LPs attracted people to take part in the subforum. The main factor of novelty, in both the game chosen to be played and how it was presented to the audience, reflects that underlying concern of "What are you bringing to the table?" While not discussed directly during the previous chapter, many of the LP threads I discuss in this paper came up during the interviews with participants. This helped focus the last study, as it provided another way in which I could identify specific LP threads for close reading and analysis. This, in turn, helped in the generation of themes for analysis, which will be covered in the next chapter.

One of the threads mentioned in this chapter is analysed more closely in Chapter 6, that being the Battletech LP by PoptartsNinja. This thread was notable, not just for how long it had run for, but for the novel manner in which it included audience participation. By allowing members of the thread to take part in the actual play of scenarios in the LP, and by letting the thread as a whole vote on what scenarios would be featured next, the Battletech LP has significantly blurred the line between content production and consumption. Going back to the literature previously reviewed, this is a major facet of participatory cultures (Jenkins, 2006), as there is less of a hierarchy within the community in regards to authorship. While the LPer certainly has more control over the final version of the content, they could not create that same content without the contributions of their participant audience.

Furthermore, this LP serves as an example of how LPs on the subforum differ from the mainstream, as mainstream LPs on YouTube do not provide the same kinds of user-generated content as found on the subforum. For example, when Jaakola studied mainstream YouTube forms of reviewing, they found that "User-generated reviewing is a bottom-up and online-native phenomenon occurring in a multimedia environment," (Jaakola, 2018). This is in contrast to the SA subforum style of review content found in LPs, where is more of collaboration between audience and content creators. In the SA LP subforum, there are fewer barriers for a content creator, such as an LPer, to work with and produce content for their audience, meaning that the subforum is more of a community of peers, rather than being dominated by the few. Posters in an LP thread are more likely to receive direct responses

from the LPer, while very few YouTube comments will ever be read by the video creator, much less get a response from them. This reflects more of the nature of content production on YouTube being one-way, where content is consumed by an audience with limited avenues for giving feedback, while the SA LP subforum is conversational in comparison, and SA LP audiences have somewhat closer relationships to the LPers. As I will demonstrate in the next chapter, this can go as far as bringing in the audience on SA as collaborators in an LP, reinforcing the participatory nature of the community.

Chapter 6: The Artifacts of Let's Play

6.1 Introduction

In the previous chapters, I have covered what motivates individuals to start making Let's Plays, and what the LP community holds to be valuable. In this chapter I will be examining the core element that LP is built on, that is, the LPs themselves. In order to better understand the people who make LPs and the community built around them, this chapter will examine the media artifacts of Let's Plays. Following the structure of the research questions I laid out in previous chapters, I have addressed the subjects of the people who participate in Let's Plays and the community they formed around the practice. The third question focuses on the media artifacts of LPs themselves, and this chapter will lay out key elements that define LPs and make them worthwhile to those who engage with them. From analysing these artifacts closer, I will demonstrate not just how the LP community creates them, but also the specific features that are critical for creating highly engaging and popular LPs.

The primary research question for this study was "What are the key components that define and characterize LP content and its development on Something Awful?" This was used as a guiding principle in the design and implementation of this study. My primary goal with this particular research was to demonstrate the concepts that make up an LP, and how those are expressed in different ways depending on various contexts.

After analysing the major genres of LPs and the thematic elements that they are built from, I found that each of the major genres relies on different elements to achieve their desired outcomes. While some rely on the gameplay skill of the player in order to draw in an audience, other LPers utilize careful and purposeful editing to present a specific LP experience. Broadly speaking, when taking the previous studies and their findings into consideration, the main force that drives the LP subforum is a desire to create new experiences through gameplay content. The LPs seen as most popular and engaged with are those that craft a new way of seeing a game, even if the audience was already familiar with it.

6.2 Methods

The first step for this research was to collect and organize the data about the LP threads that would be analysed. The goal was to find a selection of LP threads from across the 14 years of history of the subforum, that best demonstrated the different forms and styles of LPs we had observed in previous research.

Using data from Study 2, the top threads for each year, based on total number of posts in the thread, were gathered. Ten threads for each year were then selected, provided that 1) they were a completed LP thread, 2) the content in the thread was still accessible (archived, or at least no broken image/video links), and 3) they demonstrated one or more of the qualities initially identified in a notable or otherwise interesting way. At the end of this process, the dataset contained entries for 140 threads.

Table 4: Primary Genres of the LP subforum. These were identified from prior studies.

Primary Genres	Definition
Informative	The LPer seeks to explore and demonstrate the chosen game/s. Does not require 100% completion, but often overlaps. LPs usually heavily edited. Gameplay skill of LPer is focus, and necessary for the LP to work well. Discussed in interviews previously.
Narrative	LPer constructs new narrative or story for the selected game/s. Can rework or replace pre-existing narrative elements, or create entirely new one for games without stories. LP reliant on the creative writing skill of LPer. Most narrative LPs are screenshot type.
Casual	Laid back approach to most elements of LP creation. Rather than trying to demonstrate mastery of a game, casual LPs are focused on the LPer enjoying a game and sharing that feeling with their audience. Tend to have minimal editing. Broadest category of LP, usually overlaps with other types. Commonly has multiple commentators. Discussed in interviews previously.
Participatory	Collaborative type of LP. Commonly overlaps with all other types. Can be as simple as letting the thread decide what to name a character in a game, to complex involvement that changes how the LPer progresses through the game. Can manifest as Ludic participation (audience has influence in how the game is played) and Creative participation (audience has a measure of authorship in the story and narrative elements of the LP).

Table 5: Modifiers/Secondary Genres of the LP Subforum.

Modifiers/Secondary Genres	Definition
Completionist/100%	LP focuses on showing off everything a game has to offer. Always pairs with Informative.
Challenge	LPer plays the game in a unique or otherwise nonstandard way. Could be as simple as playing on the hardest difficulty. Also includes LPs where the game is customized (or the way the LPer plays is modified) to have a special control scheme. Overlaps with Modded and Informative LPs often.
Modded	LP threads where the gameplay experience is changed or expanded upon by the inclusion of modded content. Does not necessarily include mods that only serve utility or accessibility functions (lighting, graphics, UI, or similar). This is for LPs that use mods that change the fundamental nature of the game, and present an entirely different experience from the base game.
Epicaricacy (schadenfreude)	LPs of bad games, where the intended enjoyment comes from the suffering of the LPer. While LPs can be made to elicit any kind of emotional response from an audience, the easiest to identify from the dataset is schadenfreude. These LP threads often provide space for discussing the flaws in the game's design, offering insight or reflection for developers. Commonly found in Casual LPs.
Custom	Very rare, though two LPs of this type were found in the dataset. These are LPs of games that don't exist, and are essentially created by the LPer for the purpose of producing a participatory story with the audience. The use of common elements of LP formats appears to be a way to contextualize the narrative, and provide the audience easily recognized ways to engage with it.

As the dataset was being built, the initial steps for coding the data were taken. In order to keep things organized, each thread was given tags to indicate what format the LP was presented in (**V**ideo, **S**creen **S**hot, Hybrid, Audio) and what types of LP it represented (based on information from the archive page for the LP, if available, or information from the opening posts if not). These initial genres were derived from the findings from previous studies, from the responses from interviewed participants, and from formatting/categorization. The Modifiers/Secondary Genres listed in Table 5 were also generated during the first few rounds of data collection. The purpose of these secondary elements was to give further distinction to the LPs, but did not stand out as representative genres of LPs wholly on their own. These modifiers allowed me to see which parts of an LP could set it apart from others in the same primary genre, and I used them as defining aspects for steps in the coding process later on.

Table 6: LP Threads selected for analysis.

Game	*Game pub.*	*LP pub.*	*Primary Genre(s)*	*Secondary Genres/Modifying Elements*	*Format*
Sonic The Hedgehog	2006	13 May 2008	Casual	Group Commentary, Schadenfreude, Endurance (LP Recorded in one session), Blind (LPers had no prior experience with the game)	Video, Live Commentary
Super Mario 64	1996	17 Mar. 2011	Casual, Informative	Group Commentary, Challenge (Feet), 100% Completion	Video, Post Commentary
Uncharted 4: A Thief's End	2016	7 Aug. 2016	Informative, Casual	Duo Commentary, 100% Completion	Video, Post Commentary
Animal Crossing: Wild World	2005	26 Oct 2007	Narrative		Screenshot[2], Text Commentary

[2] Taken with a separate camera, as the game was played on a handheld console instead of emulated.

Game	*Game pub.*	*LP pub.*	*Primary Genre(s)*	*Secondary Genres/Modifying Elements*	*Format*
Battletech	1984	21 Jan 2011	Narrative, Participatory	Non-digital game (Used the tabletop ruleset)	Screenshot, Text Commentary
Danganronpa	2010	5 Nov 2011	Informative	Translation (Game was translated into English as part of LP)	Hybrid (Screenshots with text commentary, videos with no commentary)
X-COM UFO Defense	1994	16 Feb 2008	Narrative, Participatory	Modded (Certain updates were made using a modding utility for the game)	Screenshot, Text Commentary

Once this data set had been built, a second coding pass was performed, to identify subgenres or themes and note important details, such as the game or games being played, the date of the game's release compared to when the LP started, and the general length of the LP (number of videos/update posts). At this stage, specific threads were marked for closer analysis later on. These marked threads were selected in order to provide examples of the main types/coding categories. We marked threads that were exemplars of the different forms LPs could take, and limited it to no more than 7 threads. This gave us a data set that was 5% of the total number of threads (7 out of 140). The focus of this research was to examine LPs that best demonstrated different styles of LP, and we did not need to find a thread for each year. This is why our selected threads do not provide historical coverage of the 14 years of the subforum, as it was determined to be less important than finding the LPs best suited for our study. The threads selected for closer reading, their authors, and our justification for why they included in this study are as follows:

The *Sonic the Hedgehog 2006* LP by pokecapn and crew, posted in 2008. [3] A 3D third person action-platformer, this Sonic game is infamous for poor level design, story, and

[3] https://lparchive.org/Sonic-The-Hedgehog-2006/

environmental elements. The game is divided into three story branches, and the gameplay is different for each of the main characters that the player controls. Reaching the final ending of the game requires finishing each of the three character stories, whose narratives line up for the finale missions. This was a blind, endurance LP, where the entire game was played from start to finish without stopping and none of the group had experienced the game before. The recording was then divided into videos around 15 – 40 minutes long. In between the video posts, the main LPer would pose challenges to posters in the thread, mainly based around trivia about the Sonic series or creativity in terms of fan art the posters could find/make themselves. Blind LPs are not uncommon and are commonly found outside of the subforum when new games are released, but endurance LPs like this are rarer, possibly owing to the necessary time and willpower required. This LP was selected to provide an example of a Casual LP, as it was one of the earliest examples of that genre found in the dataset.

As a Casual LP, the Sonic 2006 LP demonstrates the way in which group LPs can emphasize that shared feeling of nostalgia for playing games with friends (as was identified by participants in Chapter 4). Furthermore, as a Blind LP, it gives a comparison point for examining one of the more common types of mainstream LPs on YouTube and streaming platforms. YouTube LPers seem to prefer to post content of newly released games, often within days of the games being released. This has an effect on the kinds of commentary and level of skill the LPer can display, as it is unlikely for the LPer to have time to master the game by that point. This, too, is present within the SA LP subforum, as can be seen in this Sonic 2006 LP. Even though the LP was published well after the game was originally released, the fact that the LPers did not have any experience playing it made their reactions more genuine. This style of LPing can have drawbacks, however, for both the SA LP community and mainstream YouTube. A lack of game skill can lead to slower progress and frustration for the LPer, which means that the audience can become impatient with their content if it does not satisfactorily progress the game.

The *Super Mario 64* LP by Vicas and various co-commentators, posted in 2011. [4] The first Mario game in 3D, and a release title for the N64. The main objective is to travel through the painting worlds in the castle, collecting stars in order to unlock deeper rooms and rescue Princess Peach from Bowser. There are a total of 120 stars in the game, but only 70 are required to reach the end. This is a unique LP as the LPer played the game using their feet,

[4] https://lparchive.org/Super-Mario-64-(With-Feet)/

only touching the controller with their hands to lift it up so they could reach the button on the underside with their toe. Throughout the videos, there is a picture in picture recording of their feet on the controller, as proof. The aim of the LP was to fully complete the game, by collecting all 120 stars. This LP was selected to demonstrate the novelty/ingenuity of LPers to make new experiences out of games seen as commonplace, like Mario 64. No other LP observed from the subforum has been played using only the LPer's feet, which sets this one apart from all others. This also overlaps somewhat with speedrunning practices, as different categories in speedrunning communities feature challenges like this. Nonstandard or novel control schemes can be found in speedruns of a variety of games. It is unlikely that these kinds of speedruns came from the same motivations as this SM64 LP, and it is probably a type of convergent evolution of gaming related communities. The gameplay skill involved and overall laid-back commentary throughout means that this LP represents both the Informative and Casual genres. Including this LP here shows that LPs can be highly varied, and will sometimes adopt nonstandard or challenging control schemes to incorporate a sense of novelty. In other words, in order to 'bring something new to the table' with a game as popular as Super Mario 64 (at least for the SA LP audience that is gaming literate), playing the game by feet is this LP's response. It is important, then, to approach further research on LPs with a willingness to accommodate unusual or unique techniques for LP production, so as not to omit valuable examples for study.

The *Uncharted 4* by Chip Cheezum and General Ironicus, posted in 2016.[5] This LP features the fourth and final entry in the Uncharted series, following treasure hunter Nathan Drake on the trail of a long-lost pirate haven. Gameplay shifts fluidly between cover shooting, platforming, and some environmental puzzle solving. The LPer shows off as much of the game as possible, while maintaining a conversational tone with his co-commentator throughout. Multiple takes appear to be edited together for the videos. Close attention is paid to small details, such as the various visual filters, and minute technical systems that most players wouldn't notice (e.g. the way light behind a character's ear is rendered, so that there is a realistic appearance of it glowing through). This LP was chosen as an additional example of the Informative genre, as much of the content is focused on showing off the game before anything else.

[5] http://chipandironicus.com/videos/uc4/index.html

The amount of editing skill and effort required for these videos, which ran from around 20 minutes to a full hour and a half for the finale, is considerably higher than every other example in the data set. Furthermore, based on observation of the LPer's other content, all of the editing is done by the primary LPer, Chip Cheezum. This allows the LPer to have a great deal of control over how their content is presented to their audience, but requires a high investment of time and skill to maintain. Since Chip Cheezum and General Ironicus have been making LPs since around 2008, it is apparent that these skills have been built up over years.

The Uncharted 4 LP serves as another comparison point for the mainstream YouTube form of LPs. Depending on the level of success of an LP channel, a YouTube LPer may hire a dedicated editor for their content, allowing them to focus on the performative side of LPing. Not every YouTube LP channel may have an editor, or even announces that they have brought on one, but there are some that have gone as far as to have multiple and make public this information. The Game Grumps, a long running LP channel on YouTube, have had at least three editors, and they usually announce them by having a video introducing the incoming editor[6]. Bringing in an editor lessens the LPer's control over the presentation of their content, as they would need to collaborate with that editor in a way that satisfies the LPer's needs. Acting as both LPer and editor, as in the case of Chip Cheezum, allows for complete control of both the performance and content presentation.

The *Animal Crossing: Wild World* LP by Chewbot, posted in 2007.[7] One of the earliest examples of an LP creating a new narrative for a game that did not have a story in the first place. This LP is commonly referred to as 'The Terrible Secret of Animal Crossing' as it presents the game as a dark, psychological horror story. The strength of the writing contributed a lot to the appeal of the LP, and it has been recognized outside the subforum in fanfiction and video game communities. As the primary focus of the LP is using the game as a medium for telling a new story, this LP was selected as a representative of the Narrative genre.

As representative of the Narrative genre, the Animal Crossing LP does not have similar mainstream LPs on YouTube to compare against. This form of narrative remixing using game

[6] In 2014, they included a skit segment as part of an LP video, introducing their second editor Kevin Abernathy. The video also featured their first editor Barry Kramer.
https://youtu.be/KuFGaq467CI?list=PLRQGRBgN_EnqIWG6TuaGLWmn9NLcaHi7P
[7] https://lparchive.org/Animal-Crossing/

texts can be compared, however, to machinima in that machinima reuses game footage or text for new storytelling. While LPs have been compared to machinima before, the Narrative form of LP has the most similarity. Broadly, machinima refers to video series that use gameplay footage and editing to create original content, often having no or very little connection to the original story of the source games. Popular series like Red vs Blue (Sorola et al, 2003) and Freeman's Mind (Accursedfarms.com, n.d.) helped elevate the format, with the former becoming a long running success. While the narrative genre from the SA LP subforum is not in the same format as mainstream machinima, this LP developed a similar style of content through an LP, by leveraging the game's systems in ways not intended by the designers. This may be a case of convergent evolution, rather than a deliberate choice by the LPer, and would require further investigation to verify.

The *Battletech* LP by PoptartsNinja (PTN), with the first thread posted in 2011 and the sequel thread posted in 2018. [8] The LP uses the original rules system for Battletech, which were released in the 80s. Primarily a tabletop miniatures game, with an expanded universe that includes video games, novels, and even a Saturday morning animated series. The setting of the game is the far future, where various interstellar factions struggle for power, and combat is conducted with Battlemechs, hulking bipedal war machines that can weigh anywhere from 10 to 100 tonnes.

The main content of the LP resembles after action reports, where posters in the thread are recruited as players/pilots, and PTN acting as the opposing forces during missions. Turn orders would be submitted by the players through private messages, and PTN would facilitate rolling the dice for all actions that required them, then write up the results and post them. Notably, almost every turn of each mission would be accompanied by descriptive writing from PTN, providing colour to the otherwise static results of each attack and movement on the field. This 'fluff,' as it was commonly referred to within the thread, gives each mission (and the characters in them) more detail and narrative weight. Additionally, between each mission, PTN would write longer fiction pieces in the world of Battletech and put forward a vote on what area of the Inner Sphere the next mission would be set in, allowing posters in the threads to determine what parts of the original canon would be focused on next. After 7 years in the first thread, and 4+ years in the ongoing (at time of writing this thesis) thread, the

[8] Thread 1: https://lparchive.org/Battletech/ Thread 2: https://forums.somethingawful.com/showthread.php?threadid=3859333

LP has written a new canon for the Battletech series, which has been fleshed out by the fluff writing of PTN as the LP went on.

This LP was chosen to represent the Ludic form of the Participatory genre, as audience participants had direct input into how the LP played out. As a comparison point to the mainstream form of LPs on YouTube, this set of threads does not share many common elements. Since this LP is all screenshot and text, there is a lot more focus on writing each update in a coherent and creative style. Based on the general style of LPs on YouTube, it appears that unscripted reactions to a game are preferable, or that disclosing the use of pre-written scripts is not widespread.

The use of audience participation is something that is almost unique to the SA LP subforum, as the systems of YouTube do not easily allow for LPs to incorporate an audience in the actual playing of a game (beyond those that might have some form of multiplayer). That doesn't mean that mainstream LPs on YouTube are incapable of giving a measure of authorship to their audiences, just that there is not yet sufficient evidence that such a practice is widespread or codified. After 11 years across two LP threads, there was enough demonstration of audience/player participation for other LPers on the subforum to emulate, with at least one other Battletech LP thread (set in a different time period in the canon from the one by PTN) starting at the time of writing this paper.

The *Danganronpa* LP by Orenronen, posted in 2011.[9] This is a translation LP of a Japanese Visual Novel Murder Mystery. The game is set in a fictional Japanese high school that only admits students that excel in a particular vocation or skill (writer, singer, athlete, etc.). The new class of students are suddenly trapped by a mysterious person, who tells them the only way out is to kill someone and get away with it. Gameplay is split between socializing with the other characters, investigating crime scenes, and figuring out the murderer in courtroom trials. At the time when the LP was posted, the game had not been released in English, so the LPer was translating the game from Japanese as they progressed through it. The appeal of a murder mystery game, combined with the relative novelty of a game unknown in English speaking communities, contributed to the popularity of the LP. This LP was selected as an additional example of the Informative genre, as the format used (primary screenshots and text commentary) presents a different way in which the genre

[9] https://lparchive.org/Dangan-Ronpa/

manifests, which includes supplementary information about Japanese culture and the translation process.

This LP can also serve as an example of how the LP subforum viewed outsider audiences at that time, and how external communities saw them in turn. During the thread, it came to the attention of posters in the thread that there was a following for the LP on Tumblr. Due to how the paywall system of SA works, there were times when the LP thread was inaccessible to non-members, and so thread posters could see when the paywall was up based on the complaints from people on Tumblr. Some of these complaints were given dramatic readings by goons in the thread[10], almost as a way to reaffirm the distinction between members of the SA LP subculture and those external to it. It is possible that the success of the English version was because there was a motivated audience of fans who learned about it through the SA LP subforum. YouTube LPers later played the game for their channels, but it is important to remember the English speaking fanbase for the game may owe its existence to this translation LP.

The *X-Com UFO Defense* LP by GuavaMoment, posted in 2008.[11] This LP uses the original X-COM game as a basis, not to be confused with the remake that came out in 2012. Each update was written from the perspective of the commander of the X-COM organization, and soldiers would be named after posters in the thread. Posters would then write journal entries and other short fiction from their character's perspective, building upon the events of the LP. This LP was selected to cover the Creative form of the Participatory genre, as audience participants provided content for the fictional framework of the LP.

During the data collection process for this chapter, we found that several other LP threads used games from the X-COM series, and were made by a few other LPers. What was interesting was that, based on observations during the selection process for which threads to study more closely, we found that most other threads featured similar creative participation. Regardless of the particular X-COM game, the LPer would name soldiers after posters in the thread, and those posters would contribute their own fan texts as their named character survived missions. This may be a common facet of this style of game, though we are unaware if the same is true outside of the SA LP thread environment. While there may be LPs of the X-COM games by more mainstream LPers on YouTube, they do not seem to use the same

[10] https://youtu.be/rUpcl_P9ZTw
[11] https://lparchive.org/X-COM-UFO-Defense/

forms of creative participation as the SA LPs do. Naming X-COM soldiers after the people who comment on their videos or on their live streams is not a common practice for mainstream LPers. This may be because the SA thread structure is better suited to fan contributions, like short fictions and fan art, which would be difficult, if not impossible, in the comments for a YouTube video. It is possible that similar fan texts do exist for mainstream LPs, just hosted on different platforms than YouTube. Investigating the comparison of X-COM LPs on SA and YouTube is better suited to future study, however. For the purposes of this research, the LP by GuavaMoment serves as good example of creative participation, as it exhibits qualities noted in LPs of similar games, and can be used to examine external LPs on YouTube in later work.

6.3 Initial Observations of the LPs

The first step to examining these LPs in closer detail was to start by looking at something all of them shared in common: The Opening Post (or OP). The first post in an LP thread usually serves as an introduction to the game, the planned format of the LP, the spoiler policy, and a table of contents that links to the update posts further on in the thread. Occasionally, an LP thread will open with the first update of the LP, without any formal introduction, though this appears to depend on the overall style and intent of the LPer. Additionally, for LPs on the LP Archive, the presentation of the LP content can be different from how it was in the thread itself. This is mainly due to how an LP gets archived, as an LPer has to request their LP be archived from the sole person running the archive[12]. Prior to the archival process, LPers often will reformat the OP, to better suit the archives, or create a new introduction for the LP on the archive. For example, from our selected threads, the *Terrible Secret of Animal Crossing* archive page is a table of contents for the update posts, plus fan art and bonus content entries. In the original thread, the OP is both the table of contents and the actual first update of the LP. While such changes during the archival process are minimal, it does indicate that LPers are conscious of how their works might look in the future, and what steps they can take to better present their completed LPs.

For the Sonic 2006 LP, the OP starts with a brief introduction explaining the endurance premise of the LP, written in a slightly poetic style. This is followed by a table of contents for the LP updates, with links to video mirrors (self-hosted, Viddler, and Google Video), all of

[12] Baldur Karlsson, in addition to running the LP Archive by himself, also did LPs in the early years. He is known for creating RenderDoc, a graphics debugging tool used by many professional game developers. His Twitter: https://twitter.com/baldurk

which are defunct. The Archive version has YouTube mirrors for backups. After the table of contents are bonus videos/fan content, with proper attributions to who posted them originally. This is then followed by the loading times for each video of the main LP, tallied by several posters in the thread, and presented as time spent on the loading screen, length of original video, and percentage of that video that was just loading. Final total of time spent on those screens for the LP was 2:24:31 of loading in 20:16:32 of time spent playing the game, or 11.88%[13].

The second post of the thread is the challenges that were posted throughout the LP, and their results. Challenges were originally contained only in the videos themselves and were kept as video exclusives for a few hours after the video went up, so posters in the thread were encouraged to watch the videos as they came out. Each contest challenge was listed with point values for first, second, third, etc., and the winners of each challenge were added after it finished. Certain challenges required posters to find outside art or other materials, which were then linked in the entry for that challenge.

For the Super Mario 64 LP, the opening post uses a casual tone to explain the premise (100% completion, using only his feet to play). Next is the video table of contents, with links to mirrors on Polsy/Blip, Baldurdash, and YouTube. Polsy isn't technically a video host, but just way for LP videos to be shown without any side panels or recommended feeds that might spoil later parts in the LP. Blip.tv is defunct, but the other hosts still work. Baldurdash is another LP specific host, another project by baldurk/Baldur Karlsson.

In the Uncharted 4 LP, the first post provides a brief (and slightly glib) summary of the series. Next is a two sentence spoiler policy for the thread, basically saying that the LPer wants their co-commentator to experience the story of the game blind. The next part of the OP is links to the previous LPs they did of the other three games in the series, then the table of contents. Videos are hosted on YouTube, but the links go to the LPer's own website, where they've embedded them. Mirrored videos are hosted on Baldurdash. Two versions of every video are listed, one with uncut commentary over cutscenes/dialogue, and one without. The table of contents is then followed by links to other content the LP duo made or were part of during the thread. This includes their own podcast, a couple of streams of other games, a

[13] The loading times for Sonic 2006 were infamous, with the game having to stop and load before and after small sections of cutscenes.

video where they look at the recently released demo for Nier: Automata, and the playlist of videos for the charity stream they did that year.

In the case of the Animal Crossing LP, commonly referred to as The Terrible Secret of Animal Crossing, there were slight differences between the original thread and the version on the LP Archive. The archival page opens with just a table of contents, then fan art, while the original thread has a short intro, the table of contents, then the first update of the LP. The introduction presents the LP as sort of a found footage/creepypasta[14] story, where the LPer claims that they had heard good things about the game series. Since they didn't have a Gamecube growing up, they were excited to try the new DS version, and they present the LP as a recounting of a horror story.

> "I've documented the journey of Billy, a young, happy lad who believes he's going off to have fantastic adventures at summer camp. The following images have **not** been altered in any way (other than to rescale them or to identify which dialog option is being chosen).
> This is a literal and practically contextual account of what happens to poor bastards sent to Animal Crossing.
> This is the true story of Billy."

The LP itself is told from the first-person perspective of Billy, and it appears that there were audio tracks provided by posters in the thread to enhance the reading experience. However, due to the fact that these tracks were hosted on Tindeck (which went defunct in 2018), these elements are lost. There appears to be a backup of the audio reading for the first update, but it does not seem like any others are available. Either the files were lost with Tindeck, or they weren't recorded in the first place.

The Battletech LP was spread across two different threads, and the OPs have similar formats, though the details are different. Both start with a brief summary of what Battletech, the tabletop war game, is like, followed by an explanation of why the LPs are rewriting Inner Sphere history, with a brief summary of the factions in the setting. Next is a section on the mechanics of how the LP works, how the audience will participate, and what players will

[14] "Copy Paste" horror, also referred to as creepypasta, is a genre of internet fiction that started from email groups and early message boards. A common, though not exclusive, focus of these stories is haunted/possessed video games, where the storyteller claims their copy of a game displays odd or disturbing elements, building up to some sort of twist or shock. For an example of an early and well known creepypasta, see 'Ben Drowned', which uses Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask as a basis.

need (private messages on SA, or an email they use regularly) in order to act as pilots. Then there are guidelines on thread rules (be civil, don't whine if a vote doesn't go your way, pilots need to have their orders in by the deadline, and so on). The table of contents is sectioned into political votes and results (which determine what scenario would be played next) then the turn-by-turn battle reports for those scenarios. Each scenario was also followed by a vote for Player MVP and Opforce MVP, with those results listed after the table of contents.

The tone of the Danganronpa LP thread is overall formal, almost perfunctory. The LPer introduces the game and how they'll be presenting it. Since the game (at that point in time) had not been released in English, the LPer would be translating it from Japanese. Of particular note is the thread policy on fan art. Since the game is a murder mystery style story, fan art was required to be vetted by the LPer (with support from the subforum moderator) prior to posting it in the thread. Any fan art, either created for the LP specifically or found elsewhere to be shared, needed to be sent to a specific email the LPer used, so they could make sure it didn't spoil later parts of the game. Ignoring this policy would be punished, as the subforum mod at the time would reprimand anyone posting spoilers (unintentional or otherwise) in the thread.

For the X-COM UFO Defense LP, the first update post introduces the game and LP, in between gifs and stills from the actual intro cutscene from the game. The LPer mentions that this isn't their first XCOM LP, as they had a previous thread for X-COM Apocalypse (which is technically the third game in the series) and that the original thread for that can be found in the Archive or the Goldmine. They explain that this LP won't really be going into detail about the mechanics or how to play, but does provide links to download and learn the game for the audience. After the introduction, the first gameplay update of the LP follows, which is written from the perspective of a recording during the first encounter with the alien invaders. The rest of the LP is written from the perspective of the commander of X-COM Otto Zander, who was also the narrator for the Apocalypse LP. The narrative conceit/context for the UFO Defense LP is that Zander is recounting the events of the first alien war, as a form of memoir or archive.

6.4 Observational Planning

Based on these initial observations, we decided to plan out how much of each LP would be used for analysis purposes. It would not be time efficient to read and examine all of the LPs, considering how long they could be. However, because of how different the presentation for

each LP was, we needed to identify how much of each would give the most comprehensive sample of the LP as a whole. For the Sonic 2006, Super Mario 64, and Uncharted 4 LPs, one or two video updates was determined to be sufficient to understand the style of the LP overall.

For the screenshot LPs in the dataset, determining how much to analyse was a bit harder. The length of an update varied between these LPs (Battletech, The Terrible Secret of Animal Crossing, X-COM, and Dangan Ronpa), and even the number of screenshots used differed between them. On average, in order to collect sufficient notes and observational data, 4-5 updates were closely read, with attention focused on the specific ways in which gameplay elements were conveyed through still images.

6.5 Methods for Coding and Theme Generation

For this study, much of our methods were based on Terry and Hayfield's text on thematic analysis, which itself is largely founded on work by Braun and Clarke (Terry and Hayfield, 2021; Braun and Clarke, 2006). The first step was to become immersed in the raw data, in order to become familiar with the dataset. This involved close reading of the screenshot LPs and viewing the video LPs. Notes were taken throughout, focusing on the types of commentary (such as conversation topics between co-commentators), gameplay elements shown (or not shown), and ways in which audience members participated (if any).

Additionally, we reviewed the results and findings from the previous two studies, in order to better identify key elements based on what participants told us, and what kinds of LPs drew more engagement. Studies 1 and 2 were also used to help organize new themes, as will be discussed in later sections. From the observational notes and previous findings, we developed a set of themes, described in more detail below. These themes were built around the elements we observed that were integral to the content of the LPs, based on what category they fell into and what the LPer's apparent intentions were for it. Overall, we found much of the work put into making these elements appeared to serve the purpose of making the gameplay experience different in some way, such that reading/viewing the LP would give a novel means of engagement compared to playing the game as intended.

6.6 Generated Themes

From the observation of these 7 LP threads, a number of themes were identified, with each LP serving as a strong representative of at least one of the themes initially observed. Each theme was considered in relation to how it reflected one or more concepts analysed in the

previous studies. Themes that focus on the content of the LPs can be seen as expressions of the paratextual nature of LPs, while the themes that relate to LP commentary and participation show the serious leisure components of the LP community. There is some overlap between the LPs, but we found that the same thematic elements can be expressed through different methods, depending on the LP and LPer's goals.

Table 7: Genres and Themes. The themes listed here for each of the primary genres are not exclusive.

Primary Category/Genre	Generated Themes
Informative	Technical Focus, Game Mastery
Casual	Game Criticism, Schadenfreude, Gameplay Recontextualization
Participatory	Gameplay Recontextualization, Ludic Participation, Creative Participation
Narrative	Gameplay Recontextualization

6.7 Primary Genre: Informative

6.7.1 Technical Focus

This theme refers to when an LP puts the game itself at the forefront of the presented content. In other words, an LP that displays 'Technical Focus' as a theme will often let the game speak for itself, or hone in on gameplay elements that might be missed during regular play. For example, in the Uncharted 4 LP, at 13:22 in the first video, Chip stops the game to open the camera mode. This mode allows the player to detach the camera from the player character and look around the environment in closer detail. Chip uses this to highlight small details and references to older games hidden in a shelf of board games, some of which can't be seen without using the camera mode. His co-commentator, Ironicus, comments that "[the developers] knew that people would want to look at their whole environmental business" which shows that the decision to focus on game design elements like this gives some insight on the process of game development. This is not to say that the personalities of the commentators are not important for an informative LP, as much of the conversation between Chip and Ironicus is that of two friends sharing what they like about the game. Not captured within this dataset is the fact that these two LPers in particular have been making LPs since

2008, and it is very likely that this conversational tone and focus on gameplay design elements have been developed over time.

6.7.2 Game Mastery

Similar to the 'Technical Focus' theme, 'Game Mastery' refers to LPs that seek to show off the content of the game in highly skilled or non-standard manner of play. The Super Mario 64 LP by Vicas demonstrates this theme in two ways. The first is completing the game to 100%, by collecting all 120 stars in the game. In general terms, completing a game to 100% and showing how it is done in an LP is the most straightforward way this theme is presented. The second way that Vicas accomplished this was the manner in which he played the game: with his feet. This self-imposed challenge allows for the LPer to show off a game, that many might already be familiar with, in a new light. While we can't expect every LPer to demonstrate 'Game Mastery' by playing with their feet, other novel or unusual gameplay conditions would certainly count.

6.8 Primary Genre: Casual

6.8.1 Game Criticism

There are also LPs that focus on the flaws of a game, rather than the positive design elements. Game Criticism here refers to those LPs that seek to highlight the problems with a game, usually in some humorous or entertaining way. The Sonic 2006 LP by pokecapn et al is somewhat unusual, as an example of this theme. It also has aspects of Game Mastery, as this LP featured a full playthrough of the game, but the fact that it was done in one marathon recording session gives it novelty. From the very first video all the way till the end of the LP, the LPer and co-commentators poke fun at the game, mainly questioning the game's bizarre story and complaining at poor controls in general. While criticizing a game can be a feature in any LP, games that provide ample space to critique are ones that justify this theme. In previous research, the Pokemon Reborn LP (described in Paper 2) also demonstrates this theme, as much of the thread discussion is divided between gawking at the awful game and trying to present solutions that could improve it. Essentially, the theme of Game Criticism is a way in which LPers and their audiences share their thoughts on the design of games, and has a secondary benefit of providing feedback on what does and doesn't work in that space.

6.8.2 Schadenfreude

This theme is named after the German word for pleasure derived by someone from another's misfortune. Usually present when bad games are being LPed, this theme is demonstrated

whenever the focus of the LP is the suffering or despair the LPer is having at the game being played. As demonstrated by the Sonic 2006 LP, this feeling can be enhanced by the endurance challenge, having to play through the whole game in one sitting. While much of the commentary in the first video of that LP is spent poking fun at the opening cutscenes and first level, by the end of the LP the group was verging into incoherency from exhaustion.

A game does not have to be terrible for this theme to be present, however. Bad luck leading to misfortune in a game can lead to moments of humour for the audience at the expense of the LPer, as can be found in the X-COM LP. During an early mission, a rocket fired at an alien passes through its head as a miss, which was given prominent focus with an animated gif.



Figure 2: Still image from gif, showing the caption added by the LPer. Original gif sourced from https://lparchive.org/X-COM-UFO-Defense/Update%206/

The focus on such mishaps allows the LPer to play the fool in a sense, providing their misfortunes to their audience as a form of entertainment. Further evidence exists to suggest there is more to examine in this kind of LPs, as noted in a previous study and the subject of the Pokemon Reborn LP thread (which was touched on in Chapter 5).

6.9 Primary Theme: Narrative

6.9.1 Gameplay Recontextualization

While it is important to examine what parts of the game are highlighted during an LP, it is equally important to look at what is left out. This theme is present in LPs that purposefully omit or recontextualize content from gameplay in their presentation, where changes to those parts of the game significantly affect the perception of the game by the audience. For example, the Terrible Secret of Animal Crossing LP uses this theme to turn the game into a horror story, by leaving out any parts that would break the immersive narrative the LP is constructing. Where the base game would prompt players to input a name for themselves and their village, the LPer in this instance leaves out this step, filling in the names for their own purposes. Furthermore, the LPer used the game's mechanics to create props for the horror story, such as in Update 5, where they use the tailoring customization in the game to create patterns that resemble a map. This is noteworthy, as the fiction of the LP presents this map as



Figure 3: Images from The Terrible Secret of Animal Crossing, demonstrating how the LPer used systems in the game to create specific elements for their original story. Original images from https://lparchive.org/Animal-Crossing/Update%205/

coming from other children trapped on this island, but what is not shown is how the LPer created each tile in the first place.

By keeping these elements out of the screenshots used for the LP, it is easier for the reader audience to buy into the premise, suspending their disbelief enough to engage with the horror narrative better.

Another example of this theme of recontextualization comes from the XCOM LP, though it is present in a different form. In the XCOM LP, much of the management systems of the game are not shown, such as research, base building, training, and manufacturing. All of these gameplay elements appear to have been handled offscreen by the LPer, with only a few research entries used within the narrative they were building for the LP. Additionally, certain missions in the LP were not created by the game naturally, and a side update explains how the LPer used a modding utility to create custom scenarios shown in the LP. By omitting these kinds of behind-the-scenes manipulation of the game, LPers are able to better control the narrative elements of their LPs, and create novel experiences for an audience that may already be familiar with the game.

When considering the differences between SA LP and LP mainstream, the theme of recontextualization is very hard to find in the mainstream form. For one, video LPs are much harder to manipulate to create a specific narrative that stands apart from the original game, which is why they are almost exclusively screenshot LPs on SA. Another reason why this theme does not show up on YouTube mainstream is that it requires much more effort and specialized writing skills to produce. It is likely that mainstream LPers on YouTube find the potential returns would not be worth investing those resources, when they already have a well-established pipeline for their content. The SA LP subforum, on the other hand, is not dependent on YouTube algorithms, and offers LPers more freedom to pursue projects and content of their own volition, regardless of financial returns.

6.10 Primary Theme: Participatory

In our examination of LPs that feature some form of audience participation, we found that the function of this participation was generally expressed in two different ways: Ludic and Creative.

6.10.1 Ludic Participation

LPs that have more ludic audience participation give the player-participants more control of how the game is played. This can be as simple as allowing the thread to vote on which

character to play as in some games, to LPs where a majority of the gameplay is determined by the participants. In our data set, the Battletech threads are a good example of this form. As each mission would need a number of pilots, the LPer would have sign ups in the thread, allowing anyone with access to private messages (or an email they didn't mind posting in the thread) to take part in. During missions, each participant would be in control of one mech on the field, and they would send their turn orders to the LPer, who would then make the appropriate rolls to determine results before writing up the turn to post in the thread. While this limited the number of player-participants somewhat (given that the average number of pilots in any given mission was usually lower than 15) there was another way in which the posters in thread could take part. After each mission, the LPer would have another vote as to where the next mission would take place, usually giving some details about which faction the players would be part of, what the scenario might be like, etc. These votes would be open to everyone in thread, so the audience had more control over which parts of the Battletech setting got focus. Further, each mission would end with votes for MVPs of each side, giving the audience and players the chance to recognize those who performed well. This was also sometimes used as a way to recognize unusual events during missions, as in one case, the glacier the scenario took place on was credited with at least 3 kills. This was a result of some very bad rolls on icy terrain, leading to more than one 'Mech falling and taking enough damage to be downed for good. This example fortunately happened to the opponent forces, and the player participants could thus view it as an amusing incident.

6.10.2 Creative Participation

In comparison to Ludic forms of participation, Creative forms do not allow the audience to dictate major gameplay decisions to the LPer, or at least, not to the same extent. Rather, the audience is given a measure of authorship over the worldbuilding context or structure of the LP. This can be seen in the X-COM LP, where posters in the thread would sign up to have a soldier named after themselves. While it does not look like the LPer prompted this, several members of the audience went on to write in-fiction journal entries/letters/other texts as their characters, writing about how their character reacted to events in the LP. Some participants even went as far as to write from the perspectives of non-combat personnel, roleplaying as pilots or scientists on base. The LPer, in turn, used what was essentially fan fiction written by posters in the thread to give dialogue to soldiers in missions, writing them based on what was provided in those fan entries. Further, during certain updates in the LP, the LPer even focused

on the non-soldier characters during a base attack mission, giving them soldier units and having them take part in the scenario.

This method of getting the members of the audience to take part in the LP by building upon the narrative or descriptive elements allows them to have greater investment in the LP itself. Seeing elements that were in some way inspired by their supplemental fiction gave the audience more reason to contribute more, and to some extent care about where the LP was going. While the overall narrative arc of the X-COM LP was determined by the LPer, there were still ways in which the readers could get invested in it.

6.11 Findings

From this analysis of how each LP and observed theme represents the different elements of the genres, we can see how each part of an LP serves specific functions. The decision between different formats (video or screenshot), types of commentary (live or post, solo or in a group, verbal or through text), methods of audience participation (through gameplay decisions or worldbuilding contributions), and the ways in which the game is contextualized; all manifest through the themes and elements discussed above.

6.11.1 LP Format

When it comes to choosing between using video recordings or still images to make an LP, the decision is mainly dependent on the kind of game being LPed and the primary genre the LPer is going for. Games that feature faster action and more moment-to-moment gameplay systems are better suited for video LPs, in order to convey those gameplay elements better. We see this in the Sonic 2006, Super Mario 64, and Uncharted 4 LPs above, as those games are relatively faster paced when compared to the rest of the dataset. Screenshots, then, are best utilized for games that are slower, or have less visual gameplay systems. Visual novels, like Danganronpa, or more strategic or tactical games, like X-COM, work better as screenshots LPs because the gameplay is less reliant on animation to convey information to the player and the audience can still understand what is happening in the game even without sound or animation cues.

As for the genres, video LPs often are used for Casual and Informative LPs, as seen in the dataset, but the reasons why video works for those genres is slightly different. Informative LPs benefit from videos by allowing the LPer to demonstrate through their gameplay skills how to play the game, instead of having to describe through text and still images. This is reinforced when considering the themes of Game Mastery and Technical focus, as careful

video editing gives the LPer more control over demonstrating the best aspects of the game and their skill with it. Casual LPs use the video format to bring forward the element of sharing an experience with others, akin to sitting next to a friend while they play a game. The presentation of the game, in the Casual context, is secondary to building that connection between audience and LPer. This is also why the themes most common to Casual LPs are those that rely more on an emotional reaction to a game. Game Criticism in Casual LPs gives the LPers a way to point out what game elements they like or dislike, while the theme of Schadenfreude allows the LP audience a way to enjoy the suffering of the LPer in a bad game.

6.11.2 LP Commentary

The style of commentary is also dependent on the goals of the LPer, and varies between the observed LPs. For the LPs with multiple commentators in the Informative genre, the person playing the game (or who played the game in recorded footage, in the case of post-commentary) often leads discussions with their co-commentators, pointing out important details and explaining how they are playing. This positioning of having a lead LPer and a friend they can explain things to, serves a direct function of the Game Mastery theme, as it provides an easily understood dynamic for examining topics about the game being played. Similarly, for Casual LPs, having multiple commentators makes that feeling of sharing a game experience much stronger. This is dependent on the relationship between the LPer and their co-commentators, but it is hard to quantify the chemistry between them, even in the threads from the dataset.

As for screenshot LPs, since commentary is through text, only the LPer is commentating. Still, the way text commentary is utilized differs depending on the genre of LP. For the Narrative LPs in the dataset, the commentary was written as part of the fiction, usually from perspective of the character or characters in the LP, as seen in The Terrible Secret of Animal Crossing and X-COM. This means that the LPer is not using commentary to remark on the game that they are playing, but rather as a means to build the story they wish to tell. Compared to screenshot Informative LPs, commentary is used in a similar fashion to video ones. As seen in the Danganronpa LP, text commentary is often delineated in some way from the dialogue already present in the game, usually by italicizing it. The commentary in that instance was focused on explaining concepts present in the game, mainly about Japanese school culture or translation quirks, so that the audience can better understand what is happening. To summarize, text commentary in screenshot LPs is used differently depending

on the intended goal of the LP, either as a storytelling device for more Narrative focused ones, or to explain important topics in the Informative style. Either way, commentary is used to add or enhance the content already present in the game.

6.11.3 Audience Participation

While not every LP has some way for the audience to take part, there were enough examples in the original dataset to provide a variety in selection. This makes exploring the different themes easier, as we have excellent examples of the two main forms of Participation: Ludic and Creative.

In LPs with Ludic Participation, the audience becomes directly involved in the LP creation process. The LPer essentially gives their audience a measure of authorship in the LP, allowing them to decide on important gameplay choices, or to play a role in different scenarios. As seen in the Battletech LP, a number of audience participants were able to play as pilots during missions, and the success or failure of any given scenario was largely dependent on their actions. This meant that teamwork and knowledge of the game's rules was a factor in how well a participant could contribute. This is not to say that newcomers to the game were excluded from participation: Based on the opening post, the thread was also open to field any questions they may have about how to play or what a particular rule meant. The limitation to this kind of Ludic Participation is that relatively few members of the audience could engage with the LP in this fashion, while the majority were left as spectators. To mitigate this issue, the LPer regularly rotated pilots for each mission, to make sure everyone who signed up had a chance to play. In short, in order for Ludic Participation to draw higher engagement from an audience, the format of the LP must be built from the very beginning to accommodate it.

Creative Participation, on the other hand, allows for more members of the audience to take part in the LP. The most common form of this theme appears to be writing fan fiction within the story created by the LP. As seen in the X-COM LP, audience participants writing from the perspective of the soldier named after them was a common occurrence, to the point that the LPer took notice and worked elements from those texts into the LP proper. From previous studies, LP fan works such as this can be a factor for the LPer's motivation as seen in the interviews discussed in Chapter 4. Knowing that the audience is engaged enough to contribute worldbuilding details to an LP is a strong form of intrinsic reward.

6.11.4 Contextualization

The theme of Game Recontextualization is one which is present to some degree in all LPs. After all, an LP is presenting a piece of interactive media in a (mostly) non-interactive format. With certain LPs, especially from the Narrative genre, the recontextualization is much more involved, in order to create an experience completely new. This is the core reason why LPs attempt to present content from a game in new contexts, so that the result is new and engaging for both the audience and the LPer to enjoy. Going back to Chapter 4, one of the main reasons why LPers make LPs is because they find it enjoyable, in both the process of making the LP and sharing it with a community of peers. This shows that much of the changes made to a game in the process of making it an LP are done to create a less 'game-like' experience. Essentially, by creating the LP paratext, the interactive game text is made less interactive, apart from limited forms found in participatory LPs. For an LP paratext to be as interactive as the source game, it would need to be made *as* a video game, which would be too complex and time consuming to be worth the effort to make real. I discuss this in greater detail in the next chapter, and how it ties into the key findings covered in Chapters 4 and 5.

6.12 Conclusions

From this in depth look into the genres of LP and the elements that they are built from, we can understand a few key ideas. On the surface, each LP genre is defined primarily by the intentions of the LPer. By making an LP with a specific goal in mind, the LPer chooses which genres their LP embodies. Informative LPs prioritize education through displays of gameplay mastery and knowledge. Narrative LPs seek to tell a new story through the medium of games. Casual LPs focus on creating a shared gameplay experience, through nostalgia or just a laid-back approach to content production. Participatory LPs set out to turn the process of Let's Playing into a collaborative effort.

All of this indicates one of the major guiding principles of the SA LP subforum, which has been touched on previously: LPs are made to provide new and engaging ways of experiencing games with the community. In other words, LPers most likely consider "What are you bringing to the table?" when it comes to making LPs, as it prompts them to focus on what making LPs provides for themselves as much as their audience. Instead of an early form of gatekeeping, as that phrase was initially used, that question has become a way to represent a driving motivation for making LPs. In order to differentiate an LP from a walkthrough, there has to be something added that makes an LP stand out, to make an LP stand as a separate paratext from the original game text. An LP stands apart from the game text, and the

LP threads that draw more engagement create something that can be enjoyed or consumed without much familiarity with the original game. The important difference here, when considering older definitions of paratext from authors such as Genette (1997), is that an LP requires a separate text but not a separate author. At least within the data collected during this thesis, none of the threads featured games being LPed by the developers of the game. Therefore, LPs as paratext occupy a distinct position when compared to the original game text, and must be interpreted differently from them. The results from this chapter demonstrate just that, and I will go into more detail about how this connects to the previous studies in the following chapter.

Chapter 7 Synthesis and Conclusion

Now that I have gone over the three studies and their immediate findings, I will draw them together in this chapter. First, I will briefly restate the research questions, before getting into the findings from the studies and their significance in relation to the concepts I applied.

7.1 Brief Summary

For this thesis, I conducted my research with three primary research questions in mind:

- What motivated the early LP producers on *Something Awful* to participate in their creation?
- What community behaviours and practices define the SA LP community, and how have they changed over time?
- What are the key components that define and characterize LP content and its development on *Something Awful*?

To answer each of these questions, I conducted three studies, with the design of each being informed by the results of the previous one. Chapter 4 started out by examining the people of Let's Play, Chapter 5 looked at community behaviours related to thread engagement, and Chapter 6 catalogued the major elements and genres of LPs themselves.

7.2 The Findings

From Chapter 4 onwards, a common element became apparent, as the answers to all three research questions related in some way to something I saw in the interviews. As I progressed through the three studies, I collected more and more evidence that reinforced this finding.

Many of the participants spoke about "What are you bringing to the table?" as a question that the LP subforum would pose to newcomers. In the early years of the LP subforum, from 2007 to around 2013 based on the responses from interview participants, this question represented the gatekeeping nature of the subforum. Here I must emphasize that the form of gatekeeping is not like that of later, reactionary and extremist online movements, and it is far outside the scope of this research to try and compare the two. I use the term to describe an aspect of the early serious leisure nature of the LP subforum. As previously discussed, one of the key components of a serious leisure community is that of a shared identity around a hobby pursuit (Stebbins, 2006, 450-451), but the way in which that identity is defined can vary for each community. Initially a measure to build a communal identity, based on requiring a certain level of quality from new LPs, the gatekeeping behaviours of the LP subforum gradually

grew to be part of the way in which the subforum set itself apart from newer, external LPers. As LPs on YouTube grew in popularity, especially from 2010 onwards, the SA LP subforum used this mindset to establish itself as a subculture.

Based on what participants said about that period of time, some of the veteran members tried to justify that question as more of a way to maintain the quality of LPs posted on the subforum. Early concerns were about having too many low quality LPs of the same game. Whenever someone expressed interest in LPing a game that was already done and on the Archive, the question was posed as a way to prompt the LPer to justify their choice of game, to explain how their LP would differ from the previous one. Again, in retrospect, this may have excluded newcomers that were unfamiliar with established practices around making LPs, but it may not have seemed that way to the members of the subforum at that time.

As the subforum grew older, the nature of the question changed with it. From 2013 to the present day, the rules governing the subforum relaxed somewhat. Certain rules were relaxed or removed outright in some cases, and threads specifically for feedback and critique became well established in the community. These spaces allowed newcomers the opportunity to refine their content and better meet the subforum expectations, but were not strictly mandated to be used. Newcomers were welcome to post a thread without having a test post, and they did not necessarily have to match the quality of LPs in the past. Instead of directly criticizing these LPs, based on the levels of engagement seen in Study 2, members of the subforum would just not engage with them, if they failed to provide LP content that was novel or engaging in some way. This behaviour, while less hostile than directly probating[15] or banning a rulebreaker, probably evolved from that early gatekeeping mindset, albeit modified as the subforum matured, so to speak. The later subforum, compared to the earlier years of its existence, did not seek to dictate what kinds of LPs people could post, as the main motivation for making LPs came from the process of creating and sharing them. They did not have to draw a huge and engaged audience for the LPer to have gotten something fulfilling from making it. This also shows how the serious leisure nature of the subforum contributed to the development of this behaviour, as serious leisure hobbyists can recognize individuals as part

[15] Probation is a lighter punishment on the forums, usually for minor offences. It means that the account is locked and cannot start new threads or post comments in any others, for a variable amount of time. Probations can be 6 hours (for things like deliberately provoking a moderator or starting vicious arguments in a thread) to 100,000 hours or 11 and a half years (to ensure someone *stays* away for being extremely unpleasant on the forums while technically not breaking any rules). Unlike bans, which can be removed by paying the $10 registration fee again, probations can't be avoided, and those that try to avoid a probation typically get banned when caught.

of their shared community identity without having to adhere to the exact same principles, as I discussed in Chapter 2. An LPer did not have to create an LP thread that appealed to everyone else on the subforum to be considered as being part of the community, as the motivations and rewards came more from the act of creating an LP, and not the external validation from an audience. Certainly, praise and engagement played a part in elevating specific threads that offered something more as part of the LP experience, but it was never an expectation for every LP thread made to achieve the same level of accomplishment.

This is where the question "What are you bringing to the table?" has come to in the modern subforum. Rather than a direct challenge as part of a gatekeeping mindset, this question has become something of an unconscious ethos LPs are made by. Even if not conscious of it, the LP threads that draw the most engagement are those that do bring something new to the table. From the second study, I demonstrated that novelty and new experiences are common to highly engaged LP threads, where the experience of watching or reading the LP is much different compared to playing the original game. In the third study, I showed that, even for the different types of LPs, the intentions behind each part of an LP are directed towards adding something new to the experience. "What are you bringing to the table?" is now a consideration that most, if not all, LPers think about, when they make their content. Even for the Casual forms of LP, there is still something added to the gameplay experience, in order to create a feeling of sharing a couch with a friend while playing the game.

7.3 How These Components Relate

The three parts of the LP subforum community as I have described here (the people, the community, and the LPs themselves) interact with each other as the subforum grew and developed over time. The individual members of the subforum have similar motivations for starting LPs, as well as the intangible rewards that came from sharing with their peers, as an element of the serious leisure nature of the community. Finding likeminded peers created an environment that pushed members to establish a common identity, realized through the content they made. While it might seem like this desire to share a common perspective on making LPs would lead to a homogenous style of making LPs, we can see from the content covered in the third study that LPs seen as highly valued stand apart from others. This push to make an LP that does something new and interesting is a direct outcome of the "What are you bringing to the table?" question, paired with the most common motivation of desiring to share in gameplay experiences with a community.

7.3.1 Let's Play and Serious Leisure

That desire to share new and novel experiences ties directly to the motivations found in other forms of serious leisure. By building and promoting a shared identity around "What are you bringing to the table?" the LP subforum not only demonstrates the qualities that make it a serious leisure community, but also provide a more complex and modern example of how serious leisure pursuits operate in a digital space. The motivating desire to not only find a community of like-minded individuals, but to also give back to that community through creating similar content, is a defining element of the LP subforum, and we can examine and understand similar hobbyist groups in the same ways. From Stebbins' work on other serious leisure groups, as I discussed in Chapter 2, it is not surprising that these elements serve the same functions for LP, and that the LP subforum shares those elements in common with non-digital hobbies. This is especially true for the motivations and rewards that participants in serious leisure get out of their joining, namely the intrinsic value of self-recognition and recognition from peer groups (Stebbins, 2006, 451). The LP subforum also shows how a serious leisure community can change or adapt to the monetization of their hobby, especially when financial rewards were not present within the hobby to start with. The introduction of systems like Patreon and YouTube ad revenue caused a shift within the SA LP community, as some viewed it as devaluing the overall purpose of making LPs, while others saw it as a way for LPers to support themselves and be able to maintain their preferred level of quality in their content, as covered in Chapter 4. Most importantly, as part of their shared identity, the LP subforum members do not view the use of monetization as a reason to exclude someone from being seen as an LP peer, and most have come to consider it just another part of the ways their content is made. What matters more is what the newcomer adds to the game by making it into an LP and how the new LP paratext sets itself apart from the original game text.

Furthermore, the different genres of LPs represent the secondary outcomes from those motivations, as LPs act as more than passive leisure. The most notable of these genres, in this sense, is the Informative style, where the audience is able to learn new or improved gameplay skills from the LPer, which they can take with them beyond the LP thread. They can apply ideas presented by the LPer to their own gameplay, or share stories within the thread, further contributing to that shared sense of experience and community identity. This conversational interaction within an LP thread is something absent from the mainstream, predominantly YouTube style of LPs, where discussions are limited to comments left on the videos, and

there is little to no pressure on the LPer to respond directly to any of them. Certainly, while an LPer on the subforum does not have to address each and every post in their thread, taking part in the active discussion lets them receive feedback on their content, allowing them to adjust or improve their Let's Plays to suit their style of Let's Playing. In some cases, this can serve as a form of game critique and analysis, where participants in the thread highlight parts of a game they enjoy or dislike the most, as seen in Chapter 5.

Using LPs as a form of game critique can also be beneficial for game developers, as it provides additional feedback on not just the game itself, but also how the audience reacts to it. While further understanding of how LPs can be utilized by game developers is beyond the scope of this thesis, there is evidence of additional work being done in similar areas, such as live streaming services like Twitch (Johnson and Woodcock, 2019; Parker and Perks, 2021). This represents another way in which the LP subforum differs from the mainstream, in that their relationship with game developers is more direct. Very rarely do game developers acknowledge the activities of the LP subforum, either through external social media posts or (usually for solo or indie game developers) posting in the thread itself. When looking at YouTube LPs, game developers seem willing to directly partner with mainstream LPers, sometimes sponsoring a video featuring an early release version of their game. This comes with financial incentives for the mainstream LPer to at least be gentler in their commentary over the game, as future sponsorship money would be dependent on good relationships with the developers. From the results of Chapters 4 and 6, there does not seem to be any evidence of developers offering sponsorship deals to SA LPers. It is not completely clear as to why this may be, and the subject would be well served by more dedicated study in the future.

With the participatory genre of LPs, we see the specific ways in which the serious leisure nature of the subforum operates, as the ways in which participation is handled ties into construction of a shared identity for a group of peers. At least for the participatory LPs reviewed in Chapter 6, the ways in which the audience was invited to contribute to the LP gave them a measure of authorship in the resulting paratext. While they did not ever usurp control of authorship from the LPer, their investment in the story of the LP was reason enough for the LPer to take their contributions into consideration, and not to discount them outright. In an LP with creative participation, like the X-COM LP, this meant that the LPer would find ways to work fan written texts into the overall narrative they were creating as part of the LP. In an LP with ludic participation, like the Battletech LP, this meant playing out player orders for their pilot each turn and being honest about the results of dice rolls. The

ways that the genre of participatory LPs highlights audience and LPer interactions gives us a great deal of insight into how similar communities might behave, and we can look for related behaviours in streaming platforms, as we can expect the flow of conversation between a streamer and their audience to impact how they perform. Already, there has been research into individual examples of ludic participation on streaming platforms like Twitch, with the standout example of Twitch Plays Pokemon, in which members of the audience gave direct button inputs (such as up, down, left, right, start, select, etc.) to the game, leading to a form of organized chaos (Margel, 2014). In this example, we see that an LPer or streamer can act as a facilitator for the audience to have complete control, by setting up a system that gives the audience members access to the game being played. Granted, such a form of gameplay is messy and less than efficient, as coordination between thousands of live viewers is next to impossible. This means that the forms of ludic participation found on the SA LP subforum are better suited to observation, as the parts of gameplay dictated by the audience are not determined in the same moment as the game is being played. The delay between giving commands and seeing the LP update allows for the LPer to better react and interpret them.

7.3.2 Let's Play and Cultural Capital

The LP community overall, then, has influence on what sort of traditions or practices are shared between LPers. The guides and technical support advice serve as a knowledge base, which enables LPers to produce content of roughly equal quality. That quality is mainly determined by what has been popular before, and thus the definition of a 'popular' LP has shifted since 2007. The person making the LP is a factor, as experienced LPers have more skill in editing and commentating, but it is not as major a driver of engagement as the quality of the LP content itself, at least within the SA LP subforum. Few members of the subforum would consider themselves or any of their peers as LP 'superparticipants,' at least by the definitions looked at in Chapter 2. This serves as further evidence of the subcultural nature of the subforum as compared to mainstream LP personalities external to it. The members of the LP subforum do not evaluate an LP by the name behind it first, and the personality of the person playing is not as important to them. This means that there are significant differences between LP practices in different communities, and understanding the different approaches to making LPs would be valuable for scholars in fields related to social media studies and online culture. The LP subforum also shows how a form of content creation and cultural capital can shift from a dedicated niche audience (as was the case with the subforum from 2007 to around 2010) to expand into a mainstream arena, and how the form of that capital shifts with

it. The LPs and LP creators that are viewed as valuable role models and inspirations for the members of the subforum do not draw their own inspiration from external LPs, such as those on YouTube alone. As LPs only rose to mainstream attention after changes to technical systems to YouTube around 2010, this new form of mainstream cultural LP capital started to overshadow the original subforum, pushing it more into a subcultural position.

While the actual content and practices on the subforum did not change dramatically in response to the new mainstream capital, the context in which it was shared and viewed did. Now that the subforum was not the only place to find LP content, there was less pressure on the audience to join the forums, as they could find LPs that appealed to a wider audience for free on YouTube. The subcultural nature of the subforum was something that SA LPers were aware of, based on their responses in Chapter 4, but it ultimately did not discourage them from continuing to make the content they had enjoyed making already. Again, going back to those motivations for participating in the LP subforum from Section 4.4, the subforum members made LPs because they enjoyed the process of making and sharing them. They could see that, external to the subforum, there were LPers who utilized their content to amass cultural and financial capital, but the SA LPers saw that as antithetical to their own identity. During these early years of the subforum, outsiders who came into the subforum would often be viewed negatively, echoing the sentiments of club cultures and how they viewed posers. As Thornton documented, anyone trying too hard to fit into a scene, or who displayed markers of the mainstream culture in a subcultural space, was not viewed favourably by the subcultural group members (Thornton, 1995). From the LP subforum community, we can see how cultural capital changes as a specific group is repositioned as a subculture, and how sometimes that does not affect their overall stance on what they make and share with each other. In other words, what was most important for considering the cultural capital within the subforum, either as an LPer or their content, was what they contributed to the subforum, or what they 'brought to the table.' It mattered less about what was popular for the external mainstream LPs and LPers, as the subcultural nature of the subforum valued LPers who simply enjoyed the act of making and sharing interesting LPs.

7.3.3 Let's Plays as Paratexts

As discussed in chapter 5, the parts of an LP that are not from the game originally are still a major factor in determining popular threads, and the communal practices have grown to foster that. This then pushes members of the LP subforum to consider ways to innovate their

content, or present well-known games in different and novel contexts. By this form of content production, LPs act as paratexts for the original games they use as a base. As seen in Chapter 6, there are many methods that have been developed for that purpose, requiring different levels of gameplay and editing skill. This means that there is not a single 'dominant' style of LP production on the subforum, and no one LPer can be credited with inventing a form of content that all others try to follow. Instead, making Let's Plays is informed by collective ideas, where different games and styles of commentary are remixed and reconfigured to suit each individual's needs. Ultimately, the community practices develop in response to some form of that original question: What are you bringing to the table? This question is answered by LPers, not as a way to justify their presence on the subforum, but as a recognition of what they and their audience find most rewarding from the LP production process.

By looking at an LP as a paratext may suggest that LPs can't be understood without some level of familiarity of the original game, but there is no evidence from this research that shows that. Much of the original game text is still found in an LP paratext, and the LP only builds on top of it. The LPs that are the exception to this are ones that omit or change large parts of the game text, as discussed in Section 6.9, and the resulting paratexts show more original work not found in the base text. Again, this means that, since the LP is less concerned with how the original game was played, knowing the game is unnecessary for understanding and enjoying the LP. In terms of significance, LPs as paratexts present a way in which to understand practices around remixing media content, and how content that starts as derivative from another source can eventually stand apart on its own. Already, there has been work done on how LPs allow researchers a method of examining gaming related literacies (Beil et al., 2021) but it is important to develop a new form of literacy for LPs themselves. The research findings here demonstrate the importance of having tools and vocabulary for analysing LPs, not just for using them as a way to understand the original game texts, but for LP paratexts as well.

When taken all together, we see how the major components studied in this work reflect on the foundational knowledge this research was built on. Individual Let's Players join the community because they seek gaming related content that provides an experience they would not get just by playing it themselves. They seek to contribute to the community of their peers, not for monetary gain or recognition in external groups, but to share in the serious leisure experience of playing games with others, wherever in the world they might be. The work they

create holds meaning for them because of its transformative nature, by taking a game and building a paratextual artifact out of it, which then presents something new.

7.4 Limitations and Future Work

This work draws attention to the SA LP community. Accordingly, my findings do not immediately apply to any other LP community. Nevertheless, my work can provide an indication of what one can expect to find in similar spaces online, and would serve as a comparison point in future studies. Further, because the LP subforum uses English in all communications, and the Let's Plays and Let's Players I analysed were made in English, I cannot claim to present any conclusions about LPs in other languages. LPers who speak multiple languages fell outside the scope of my research. This presents a valuable opportunity for future research, to apply these findings to non-English LP communities, and to see how the language context influences the serious leisure nature of LP.

Another limiting factor is the methods I applied in my research. The methods I chose were well suited to analysing the Let's Play subforum for qualitative data, though they do not provide as much quantitative information. Details such as exact population of the subforum community, size/length of average LP content, and financial returns for LPers that use Patreon or other monetization platforms, could not be uncovered through the methodology I employed. Other forms of analysis are better suited for studying these topics, and would be better served in future research intended to examine that side of making LPs in particular.

Another opportunity for future research is on the topic of speedrunning and streaming practices, and how they relate to Let's Plays. While there are similarities in the content and practices in LPs and other online forms of content, enumerating the differences would require an entire research project dedicated to the topic. There is value in understanding the ways in which LP and streaming communities resemble each other, especially when looking at how they developed side by side, and analysing them would be suited as the primary focus of a future study. For my own work, the findings I have provided would serve well as a comparison point for future scholars looking at streaming practices and communities.

Something I found while studying the LP subforum is the pressure to innovate and be creative when making LP content. This comes partially from the consideration of "What are you bringing to the table?" but I did not go into much detail on the specific ways in which creativity was developed. Understanding a community based on content creation practices, and how those practices evolve over time, is worthy of the dedicated focus from a separate

study, and would spread my efforts as a single researcher too thin. This work would most definitely be valuable when researching speedrunning and streaming practices, as the push towards greater creativity and innovation may share similar origins.

There are also further opportunities to expand the research beyond the perspectives I included in my work. While it was worthwhile to interview members of the Let's Play community, as it fit within my research design to examine how they perceived their experiences there, this meant that other groups are still undocumented, at least within the context of my own work. Specifically, I could not incorporate accounts from game developers and designers, and what their opinions were of Let's Plays. In a sense, a Let's Play can be useful, from a design perspective, for understanding what elements of a game a player most enjoys, providing a direct form of feedback to a developer. However, as just one scholar, it was outside my scope to conduct a similar series of interviews just with game designers about LPs of their games. I do hold that a study like that would be valuable to build off of my findings here, and it would provide another resource for game developers to draw upon in their own works.

One other factor to keep in mind when reviewing my work is the time I performed it. I started my work in 2019, with the majority of data collection and writing being done from 2020 to 2022. In this time, the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted a great deal of academic work. Since all of my data collection was performed online, there was not a direct obstacle to that part of my research. However, the context in which my data was collected does not necessarily reflect the state of the Let's Play phenomenon in a post-Covid environment. My work does not address changes to the LP community and the behaviours that came out of the pandemic. It is possible that, since more people sought online forms of entertainment during this time, the rates of engagement with LP content changed, or that the kinds of LPs most popular shifted. As far as my work stands, I must leave it for a future study to examine how exactly the Covid-19 pandemic influenced the phenomenon of Let's Play.

7.5 Conclusion

I never really expected that my first LP back in 2010 would lead to this, but I am grateful for the work I've done since. Let's Plays are a diverse phenomenon, and there is much more to study with them. As the motivation for part of this research was to address some of the gaps in the literature about LP, I have sought to answer a few key questions, and the preceding chapters have covered them in greater detail.

Examining the Let's Play subforum on *Something Awful* meant that I needed to research the critical aspects that it was made of, namely the people which participate in making LPs, the shared community behaviours that developed from them, and the variety of forms LPs could take. Taken together, I have been able to produce a more detailed description of the LP subforum, its communal ideals, and the digital context this form of creative media evolved in.

While the research I have presented here is limited to the LP subforum of *Something Awful*, my findings can be applied to other online spaces in future works. There are certainly other LP communities, external to *Something Awful*, that may define themselves in different ways, but who might create and share content based on similar principles of contributing to new game paratexts. Further, by reading and understanding LPs in general, we can view LPs as a form of game critique, as the discussion surrounding an LP often revolves around game design elements players most enjoy or dislike. If nothing else, examining LPs can be used as a method for pursuing other subjects in games studies, and could be more time efficient than trying to study the games in a vacuum.

The defining appeal of Let's Plays, and the element that can be found to some degree within the foundation of the LP subforum, is a desire to create and share gameplay experiences that add something new to the base game text. That desire serves as a major motivating factor for participating in the LP community, as well as the best measure by which highly popular LPs are engaged with by an audience of peers. Even with a wide variety of LP types and genres, the main consideration, both for the LP creator and the audience, is what the LP contributes that wouldn't be found just by playing the same game. In other words, "What are you bringing to the table?" is not so much a barrier to entry, as it was in the past, but a consideration of how an LP gives new and novel meanings to games as texts.

Ultimately, the LP subforum is active to this day, with new LPers starting threads alongside those that have been around for a decade or more. While the forms of online communication since 2007 have evolved considerably, the LP subforum has persisted, adapting to new technology and changes in online worlds as necessary. Throughout it all, the Let's Players there have continued to write and create new stories through the medium of their favourite games, and I look forward to whatever they make next.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Current Rules for the Let's Play Subforum

Rules for posting in LP:

1. **LP Threads only, please!**

   Don't post a thread that's not an LP Thread. General discussion should go in the Sandcastle, and we have a Recommendation Thread for plugging and discussing threads you love.

   Rarely, we permit threads for discussion of specific issues that won't fit in the Sandcastle. If you have an idea for such a thread, please ask a mod for approval.

2. **Keep the General SA Forum Rules in mind!**

   If you take away only one thing from them, make it this thing:

   > Lowtax posted:
   >
   > Before replying, please ask yourself the following question: **"Does my reply offer any significant advice or help contribute to the conversation in any fashion?"**
   >
   > If you can answer "yes" to this, then please reply. If you cannot, then refrain from replying.

3. **Play nice, and don't be a dick!**

   It generally takes a lot of effort to run an LP thread. Please be respectful of that when participating! Criticism isn't verboten; just don't make it personal, don't use slurs, and don't be inflammatory. Try not to be a creep either. We don't think we're asking a lot here.

   If you really don't like a thread, vote 1 and post elsewhere.

If you come across someone disregarding this directive...

4. **Report shitheads!**

   This cannot be stressed enough. LP threads aren't trivial to follow, and no amount of mods can follow them all. **We probably won't see bad posts if they're not reported!** So use that report button if you've got it (requires Platinum), or contact a mod some other way if you don't.

5. **Respect spoiler rules!**

   If the LPer requests spoilers be tagged, then tag your spoilers! If the LPer requests spoilers not be posted at all, don't post spoilers at all! The mod team will typically defer to the LPer's judgement when dealing with spoiler complaints.

   Don't use spoiler tags for things that aren't spoilers.

   - **When reporting posts for spoilers, please include details!** We haven't played everything. It's not always obvious, so assume we don't know! There's enough space in the report form now to tell us exactly what part of the offending post is a spoiler, so we can better judge what to do about it. Don't worry about spoiling *us*, by the way, we know what we signed up for.

Rules for posting LPs:

1. **Above all else, show us you give a damn!**

   The internet-wide LP landscape has changed, a lot, since this subforum got started, but we still presume to have standards.

   Don't just post a link to your channel and be done with it. Threads that are barebones, transparently farming for reputation or exposure, or otherwise just plain insincere are liable to be gassed. There's no hard and fast rules on how to run a thread, but one way or another, if you put in effort (or don't), it will show in the end.

2. **No YouTube dumps or reposts!**

   The point of an LP thread is, if not participation, at least discussion. It's not against the rules to have a backlog or even to record an entire playthrough in advance - just don't post it all at once.

   Also, don't re-post an LP you've already started elsewhere if it's a significant way through already. Create your LP for the thread, not the other way around.

3. Rules regarding **soliciting donations:**

   SA broadly prohibits linking personal fundraisers. However, in threads in which posters share their *work*, we consider it acceptable to let it be known that you take donations.

   You are permitted to link your Patreon/Ko-Fi/PayPal/etc *once*, with a *short* blurb, in the OP of your LP thread. Don't post it more than once, and don't labour the point after the fact.

   We are trusting you not to cross the line into shilling. We reserve the right to remove your links and otherwise exercise the typical mod discretion if, in our judgement, you are pushing that boundary.

   There are no restrictions on streaming for charity (e.g., Extra Life), so long as your donation links are for the charity in question and not you personally.

4. Rules regarding **adult content:**

   Some games are porn. This is not the place for these games. You know these games when you see them.

   Some games are steeped in themes and depictions of sex and sexuality, yet manage to *not* just be porn. You will have to use your best judgement to determine whether or not it is a good idea to exhibit these games. If in any doubt at all, ask the mods for a

judgement before posting.

Some games happen to get a little risqué from time to time. We've got nothing against this, but if a given pic is particularly NSFW, you should probably link it instead of posting it inline. If it's going to happen a lot, consider just putting an NSFW warning in your thread title. People appreciate content warnings.

Appendix B: Plain Language Statement given to participants interviewed in Chapter 4

Plain Language Statement

School of Computing and Information Systems

Project: Let's Play Communities: Definitions, Development, and Economies

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Introduction

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research project. The following few pages will provide you with further information about the project, so that you can decide if you would like to take part in this research.

Please take the time to read this information carefully. You may ask questions about anything you don't understand or want to know more about.

Your participation is voluntary. If you don't wish to take part, you don't have to. If you begin participating, you can also stop at any time.

What is this research about?

Through this research, we aim to understand more about Let's Play communities – that is, communities formed around the practice of producing Let's Play content, which documents the experience of playing through a game and is posted on the internet. We aim to learn more about the reasons why people make Let's Plays, and how those reasons may have changed over time. We also aim to develop a better understanding of how game developers can interact with these communities, in order to create better games and Let's Plays.

What will I be asked to do?

Should you agree to participate, you will be asked to take part in a one-on-one interview over voice chat with a researcher. We expect this will take about 45-60 minutes of your time. The interview questions will be about your experiences in the Let's Play community, your process for making Let's Plays, and some descriptive information about yourself. Interviews will be audio recorded.

What are the possible benefits?

This project will help us to understand the ways in which Let's Play communities formed, the reasons why people make Let's Plays, and how those have changed over time. It will also identify the influence that monetization systems have had on Let's Plays, giving us better ways of describing the development of this kind of content, and the significance of Let's Play communities. It will also identify opportunities for game developers to collaborate with Let's Play communities in meaningful ways.

This will benefit the games industry as it offers a framework for understanding the motivations behind this form of content and its production. It will benefit Let's Players by documenting the history of the medium, as well as increasing the overall understanding of their communities for academics and other newcomers.

What are the possible risks?

We have not identified any risks associated with your participation in this interview.

Do I have to take part?

No. Participation is completely voluntary. You are able to withdraw at any time. Please be aware that withdrawal of data is not possible at all times because of the removal of identifying names. We will endeavour to remove as much of your data as feasible should you request it. Interviewees can contact us at any time to have their data withdrawn from any future work on this project.

Will I hear about the results of this project?

Our website at https://bmckitrickresearch.wordpress.com/important-documents/ will always have the latest news and results from our project. We will include both informal updates and any academic papers that result from the research. As far as possible, we will link to open access versions of this information. If some papers are behind a research paywall, you are welcome to email the researcher and request a copy of the work.

What will happen to information about me?

If we interview you, the interview will be transcribed by a third party contractor. The audio data from the interview and the transcription will be securely stored on our servers. The data will be kept securely for five years after the last date of publication, before being destroyed. We will use a pseudonym for you in the saved transcription, and will remove personally identifying information (for example, about the company you work for). Sometimes, we return to old research data to re-analyse it or to compare it to later data.

We understand that the Let's Play community is relatively small and contained. While we will use a pseudonym to obscure your identity (as mentioned above), it may not be possible

to fully guarantee your anonymity. We will send you copies of your anonymised interview transcript after the interviews, to ensure that you are comfortable with the material discussed.

Where can I get further information?

If you would like more information about the project, please contact Brian McKitrick, bmckitrick@student.unimelb.edu.au or the responsible researcher Martin Gibbs, martin.gibbs@unimelb.edu.au +613 8344 1394.

Who can I contact if I have any concerns about the project?

This research project has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of The University of Melbourne. If you have any concerns or complaints about the conduct of this research project, which you do not wish to discuss with the research team, you should contact the Manager, Human Research Ethics, Research Ethics and Integrity, University of Melbourne, VIC 3010. Tel: +61 3 8344 2073 or Email: HumanEthics-complaints@unimelb.edu.au. All complaints will be treated confidentially. In any correspondence please provide the name of the research team or the name or ethics ID number of the research project.

Appendix C: List of Interview Questions used for the study in Chapter 4

The following are examples of questions that will be used in the interviews with participants selected from Let's Play communities. The interviews will be semi-structured and conversational, with a focus on how participants view the Let's Play community and their relationship with it.

- What made you start making Let's Plays?
- Do you watch Let's Plays by other creators?
  - What aspects do you enjoy in the Let's Plays you watch?
- What is your process for making Let's Plays?
  - Has your process changed over time? In what ways?
  - Does the way in which you edit/record Let's Plays affect your commentary?
- Do you have a specific audience in mind when you create Let's Plays?
- Do you monetize your Let's Play content?
  - In what ways do you monetize your content?
  - How has monetization affected the way in which you make Let's Plays?
- Are there any other online communities you consider yourself to be a member of?
  - Does your membership to other communities influence your Let's Play content?

Demographic questions include:

- Can you tell me a little about yourself?
  - Time as active Let's Player
  - Time as community member
  - Age at which started Let's Playing