MASTER THESIS

WATCHING THE GAME: HOW WE MAY UNDERSTAND *LET'S PLAY* VIDEOS

Abstract: Let's Play videos have enormously increased in popularity over the last few years, becoming an important part of online gaming culture. So far little attention has been paid to this phenomenon by media scholars. This thesis outlines three possible media studies approaches to Let's Plays and argues for each that they provide valuable insights that other approaches could not, based on a textual analysis of a select set of Let's Play videos. Firstly it sees Let's Plays as paratexts to their games and argues that by using the lens of game studies, the specific relation of the Let's Play with its game can be better understood. Secondly a categorization of Let's Play producers is put forth and it is suggested that this can form the basis for explaining the differences of focus in their videos. Thirdly the phenomenon is set within the wider context of online video sharing, studying the relations between the various producers and other stakeholders, like YouTube and game developers.

Keywords: Let's Play, YouTube, participatory culture, fan culture, game studies, ludology.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction

Let's Play (LP) videos have seen a drastic rise in popularity over the last few years. Although the exact starting point of the phenomenon is unclear and often placed as early as 2005 (Klepek 2015), the genre only began to get widespread attention in the main stream gaming community around late 2011. The videos are recordings of one or multiple people playing a videogame and providing narration to the action on screen. Although some Let's Players (LPers) also use a video camera to record themselves whilst playing, the bulk of the videos only show the screen as the player of the game sees it themselves. The footage is furthermore shown with minimal editing and presents itself as simply being a recorded play session. The videos are distributed via popular video sharing websites, most commonly YouTube, although some professional gaming media now also show them via their own websites. Moreover dedicated channels such as Twitch.tv offer LPers the option to live stream their play sessions.

What sets LPs apart from earlier phenomena such as speed runs and super play videos is that they are not necessarily focused on the gaming prowess of the LPer (Glas 2015). Their narrative content can vary from the humorous to the educational, and the reasons for an audience to watch them differ greatly. The most popular LPs have millions of subscribers and their producers are able to make a living of making them.

So far LPs have seen comparatively little attention from new media scholars. Media studies being an inherently reflexive field, averse to attempting to make predictions about future developments, it makes sense that the phenomenon needed to develop itself first. Now that LPs have established themselves within the gaming community and clearer structures within it can be delineated, the first studies are beginning to be undertaken.

This thesis seeks to make a contribution to the study of this phenomenon by exploring what approaches to this new phenomenon may be fruitful avenues of inquiry for media scholars to take. Media studies being the wide-ranging and interdisciplinary field that it is, many different choices could be made here and covering them all would be far beyond the scope of this paper. Rather an explorative study is proposed that outlines three different approaches to studying LP.
The first approach will look at LPs as distinct paratexts of the medium of games and individually of the games portrayed in them. It will be argued that although LPs are videos, their production with the use of an existing interactive medium can be studied to come to a better understanding about the interplay between LPer, game and audience. Secondly the producers will be studied in order to show that this is not a homogenous group, but rather different producers have different reasons to make LPs. A first framework to categorize them with is proposed to show these differences and provide a basis for further inquiry into them. The third approach then looks at the production context and the relation

to the overall process of cultural production within the game industry. Placing them within the wider context of convergence culture the development of certain LP characteristics can be better understood if their position in the field is more clearly outlined.

This research being explorative the intention is not to develop a full overview of either how a game's characteristics or a LPers relation to a developer influences the LPs they make. Rather it demonstrates that using such lenses provides insights that are so far sorely lacking in the academic discourse. With the sparse research that is there either taking a more social studies approach (cf. Smith & Sanchez 2015, Fjællingsdal 2014) or looking at the judicial questions (cf. Taylor 2015, Pfeil 2015), the reflective media studies angle has been left untested[1]. Moreover the one text that does take a media studies approach (Glas 2015), is not based on a systematic study of the videos itself. By placing the phenomenon respectively within theories from game studies, production studies and participatory culture, and conducting a case study of a select group of LPs, this thesis demonstrates the need for and use of such research. Furthermore it proposes frameworks for each of these, that can be extended upon in future research that does do a deeper analysis invoking such theories.

That such studies have social relevance is evidenced more than anything by LPs becoming a staple of gaming community within a few years. This changes the practices of the gaming industry, with millions in advertisement revenue moving from traditional media outlets to professional LPers, creating new business possibilities. More importantly however it is a new way in which gaming fans relate to their medium. The humanities need to explore how this impacts their understanding, not just of the games they play, but of the topics discussed in them. As games move forward as a medium and begin to cover topics such as politics or our relation to the world or ourselves, the ways in which people make sense of them forms a central part of them forming their identity, politic preferences and morality (McKee 2003, 1).

In the next chapter the methodological approach taken in this thesis is outlined, as well as defining the corpus and limitations of this research. Chapter three then covers LPs as a paratext of the specific game played in them. It explains why adapting games into videos is different from adapting older types of narrative media and presents a case study to showcase a possible research design. Chapter four proposes a framework for categorizing LP producers based on professionalization and production focus. Chapter five then invokes this framework to look at the production context of LP producers, mapping the influence that the platform and developers exert on a phenomenon that appears fan driven. Chapter six shortly concludes and reviews these approaches and gives some recommendations for further research based on them, as well as other avenues of research that could not be explored here.

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[1] Note as well that even in these fields the articles are often written by master students as theses or papers, rather than published in peer reviewed journals.

2. Methodological framework

In this section the methodological approach taken in this study is outlined, as well as discussing choices made in terms of corpus and practical implementation of methods.

2.1 Textual analysis

This thesis proposes to study LPs as paratexts to the games that are played within them. That is to say the game is a text that is a worthwhile object of study which can be interpreted as something with meaning, but 'this is not limited to the work itself, but also to where the text is interpreted and by whom (Fernández-Vara 2015, 6). Paratexts then are a term introduced by Gérard Genette as texts that surround a main work that change the way the audiences interact with them (Genette 1991). Such works form the general culture around the text and can be studied as texts in themselves. Doing so allows not only their study in relation to the central work (as done in chapter 3), but also to look at the context in which they are produced and questions about ownership and authoritorial authority (Birke & Christ 2013, 81).

The main methodology employed will be a textual analysis of a select corpus of Let's Play videos. A textual analysis is an in-depth study of a text (or multiple texts), used to come to a generalized understanding of the wider phenomenon the text is an exponent of (Fernández-Vara 2015, 8-9). At its most basic level a textual analysis is the practice of making an educated guess about the way people might make sense of a text (McKee 2003, 1). Although it is sometimes criticized as being unscientific for its lack of quantitative repeatable results (Ibid 118), it does provide an explorative way to study a new phenomenon. Moreover whereas a content analysis would provide a type of text focused analysis that does yield such results, its focus on categorization and numerical interpretation make it far less useful to conduct the explorative study proposed here (Hesmondhalgh 2006, 120). The textual analysis on the other hand is inherently aware of the fact that the findings it produces are mainly true for the particular context and time they are studied in. This is not to say that it does not seek to generalize its findings, but it guards against the danger of presenting certain elements in a game or LP as necessarily leading to the findings it produces. Furthermore by comparing multiple texts the results are broadened and the generalized conclusions supported by an analysis that is comparative in the way in which it highlights both the similarities and the differences between the videos.

2.2 Scope

For the scope of this thesis it was necessary to limit the amount and types of Let's Plays studied. This means that some avenues of exploration that would have been worthwhile have fallen by the wayside; these will be outlined in the outlook chapter as suggestions for further research.

Firstly the major distinction had to be made between recorded LPs and live streamed ones, in favour of

the first type. The dynamic of the interaction between LPer and audience and the effects this has on the video is too different to treat them as the same, whereas accounting for these differences would require a greater focus on the player-audience dynamic than this methodology allows. Secondly the choice was made to look at different instalments of different series of LPs, rather than following the progression of one or two series from instalment to instalment. Being an explorative study it is more useful to be able to present findings based on a wider scope of LPs and LPers, rather than running the risk of focusing on the peculiarities of one or two LPers. Thirdly the textual analysis focussed on the areas relevant to this study within the different frameworks discussed below. This means that other theoretical approaches such as looking at the rhetorics of LPS have not been included[2]. Lastly the scope was limited to one game to study, CRUSADER KINGS II (Paradox Development Studios 2012), to show the power of the methods proposed in depth. The author is personally well-acquainted with this game and its LPs, which, as shall be seen below, is often a requirement in order to be able to fully understand a LP. Crusader Kings II (CKII) also has a large body of different LPs available on YouTube and the game and its developer have a dedicated group of fans. This makes it easier to place the phenomenon of LP within the wider fan discourse around the game.

2.3 CORPUS

To understand the analysis below fully, it is necessary for the reader to have a basic understanding of the game. Though here only certain mechanics are highlighted, it gives a general idea of the type of game.

Crusader Kings II is a grand-strategy game that has the player take on the role of different European and Near-Eastern feudal rulers in the middle ages. The game doesn't present the player with a clear goal, but rather provides them with a political-historical context as a starting point, from which it then generates a possible alternate turn of historical events, influenced by the player's actions. The player can fight other rulers to gain more titles (and land), strategically form alliances via marriage, engage in intrigue to get their way, have characters assassinated, and many other things they feel might advance their position. The only restriction is the need to ensure a character of

Figure 1: Screenshots from Crusader Kings II (made by author)

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[2] It was for example noted that many LPers used 'we' and 'our' even though they played the game alone. A broader analysis than could be provided here would however be necessary to draw certain conclusions based on this observation.

their dynasty inherits (some) of their titles, since the player's control will move to an heir upon their character's death. Presented from a top down perspective on a map stretching from Iceland to India, the player controls the action via a plethora of menus, and gets feedback via textboxes and the different map modes available to them (see figure 1).

The game is part of a series of grand-strategy games by Paradox Interactive, which, although different in many core-mechanics, present a sort of continuum in that together their timeframe spans from the eight until the mid-twentieth century. Moreover via save file converters players can take the alternate state of the world they end one game with to start the following game with it. CKII is the first of these games which reached a wider audience, but it places within this frame in terms of the fan community it was received in.

Concretely the corpus was formed by selecting a number of LP videos about CKII. The videos were categorized based on views and subscribers to the uploader's channel. To capture the entire width of the LPs a sub selection was then made based on the number of views a video had, as well as where in a series it placed. This sub selection was then studied in depth by transcribing the narration, recording the timestamp and the action that could be seen on the screen. Some qualitative assessments had to be made here, since often many things would be going on at once and the LPer would jump from one thing to another, only to return to an item a minute later. This separation of different 'threads' within a videos narrative flow is somewhat artificial and might not be altogether representative of the audience's experience. This was however accepted as a minor issue which needed to be accepted for the sake of clarity as well as to allow for any meaningful results to be deduced from a comparative study. Based on the narration-action relation the entries were then placed in different categories, to gain an insight in what different areas LPers focus on.

3. STUDYING LET'S PLAYS AS PARATEXTS TO GAMES

Since Let's Plays are videos it makes sense to tend to draw on earlier research that studies videos in order to understand them. Turning to film studies or television studies for pointers on how to study them is indeed productive and, as explained in the previous part, this thesis does so in part. Treating them just as films however belies their origin in and production via the act of playing an interactive game. In this chapter the relation between the game being portrayed and the video produced will be discussed, arguing that the videos are very much a paratext of the specific game played and studying them as such allows for a lens that provides useful new insights.

3.1 LUDOLOGY

Before we can turn to this relation however, it is first necessary to come to an understanding of what sets videogames apart from other types of media and why that difference so strongly changes the way they are studied. This is a debate that permeated the early days of the field of game studies when scholars with a background in film studies or literature studies started studying games as a narrative medium akin to their old media texts. Others argued for a drastically different approach that made the act of playing the defining characteristic in studying the medium. Although this debate between the 'narratologists' versus the 'ludologists' has died down somewhat in recent years, its core principles are of interest here, precisely because videos lend themselves so well for a narratological explanation, that other findings end up by the wayside if not expressly looked for .

The difference in approach is perhaps best summarized in the words of the Norwegian game scholar Espen Aarseth in his editorial for the first issue of *The International Journal of Game Studies*: 'Games are both object and process; they can't be read as texts or listened to as music, they must be played. Playing is integral, not coincidental like the appreciative reader or listener (2001).' The story of a film doesn't change when there is no one to watch it. The story of a game changes based on the player, even if only in the details of the execution. Even the most narratively linear game has a player failing, re-trying and then succeeding a certain part, or using more or less time to progress through certain parts of the game than another player, changing the flow of the narrative in the process. Ludologists therefore often draw on another of Aarseth's works *Cybertext* (1997) in which he introduces the concept of *ergodic literature*; texts in which a 'nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text (1997, 1).' Where narrative theory only lets the reader engage in the interpretation of a text, ergodic literature demand of the reader that they make choices; choose which paths to take or what parts to read. This is not to say that all ludologists claim that narrative and its study have no place in game studies (Schut 2003), but construing games as only narrative misses the fundamental 'lived experience' of a player. A narratological approach could map out a game's entire narrative tree,

however the player does not see the entire narrative tree (in some cases they aren't even aware they are making a narrative altering choice).

Studying LPs as paratexts to this ergodic literature means taking into account this lived experience by the LPer, by focussing on the influence of the main text on this interaction which produces the LP. This can be seen on two levels, that of the gameplay and that of the narration. Firstly for the gameplay a comparison might be drawn here with a book being adapted into an audiobook[3]. The voice-over will read the book cover to cover, changing it from a read to a listened to medium, but makes no meaningful changes to the narrative of the work. Conversely in LPs the player's specific choices and play styles will determine the narrative presented to the viewer of their video; the narrative is the result of an interaction between player and game.

Secondly there is the narration the LPers records as they play the game. It is almost exclusively a reaction to events in the game, either explanation of choices or considerations, visceral reactions to events or simply general opinions on parts of the game. This goes further than a simple relation of an event in game leading to a reaction from a player however. Rather games that focus heavily on tactics make a discussion of tactics far more likely to occur in a LP, whereas a game focused on exploration invites the LPer to show of a new discovery they've made.

What is important to reiterate here is that most LPs have little to no editing besides the cutting up into episodes. Both the gameplay and narration is a non-scripted recording. The game itself is the primary tool with which LPs are produced. And just like the chisel and material a sculptor uses influences the statue she makes, so does the game played influence the LP produced.

3.2 THE MDA FRAMEWORK

It has been made clear that we shouldn't study LPs as narratives that happen to have been produced using games, as might've been suitable for machinima, but really pay attention to the aspect of play in their production. That is to say we need to study the game they are a paratext of in and of itself and have a way to relate it to the findings we get from the videos.

In order to do this I have opted for the 'Mechanics, Dynamics and Aesthetics framework' (MDA framework) put forth by Hunicke, LeBlanc and Zubek (2004). Although this framework has its own shortcomings in the study of game mechanics (cf. Sicart 2008), it has a few key strengths that make it useful here.

The framework, as it name suggests, recognizes three parts in its formal approach to understanding games; mechanics, dynamics and aesthetics. Mechanics are the algorithms, representations and other workings of the game. Dynamics are the run-time behaviour that arises as players interact with the game. Aesthetics are the 'emotional responses' that are evoked in the player (Hunicke etal. 2004).

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[3] In both adaptions the performance of either the LPer or the audiobook voice-over is form another interesting avenue of study, this is shortly outlined in the last chapter of this thesis.

These three elements influence one another, and all provide a different lens to study games with. A strength of this approach for the study of games is that where game designers often approach a game from the side of mechanics, the players mainly engage with the aesthetics. LPers in their role as player engage mainly with the aesthetics, but as the producer of a LP they also have to make production choices which have them interact on the mechanics/dynamics level. Invoking the MDA framework therefore makes sense, since it allows the relation between video and game to be dissected on these different levels, providing a more fine-grained way of understanding it than approaches that are more developer or more player oriented.

3.2.1 MECHANICS

Looking at mechanics first, a few illustrations may highlight the type of findings the approach can yield. Imagine two identical games, but one is viewed from the first person perspective and the other viewed from a third person perspective (the camera hovering behind the player's avatar). In LPs based on the former, the audience can only see what the player chooses to directly look at. In the case of the latter they can choose somewhat more freely what part of the screen they look at, which may differ from what the LPer focuses on in their narration. Or imagine a game which relies on certain audio cues. If the player continually talks, the audience might not be able to hear these cues, and might be able to appreciate such a LP far less. Whether this leads to LPers simply talking far less, being forced to verbally acknowledge certain cues or LPs of this game simply not being made are not conclusions that can be come to here directly. However unpacking a game's mechanics in this way allows for grounded explanations to be given when doing a textual analysis of the videos.

3.2.2 DYNAMICS

For dynamics let's look at the difference between a pausable and a non-pausable game in which the flow of gameplay continues. If the LPer can't pause they are forced to keep playing whilst narrating, much like a sports commentator has to keep with the flow of the action. Whereas when they can pause, they can choose to discuss a specific event or choice more in depth, more comparable with a sports analyst after a match. This difference in mechanic can thus make a huge difference in the type of narrative content a LP may contain. That is of course not to say that non-pause able games therefore necessarily exclude certain content. After all a football commentator may also choose to discuss a striker's scoring statistics during the match. It does however provide tools to explain why certain content may be far less prominent in the one LP as compared to the other.

3.2.3 AESTHETICS

Aesthetics, lastly, provide a less clear-cut category within the MDA framework and the term 'emotional response' is vague at best. Some further clarification is provided in a taxonomy of types of aesthetics, such as 'game a drama', 'game as obstacle course' or 'game as social framework', but this is

somewhat limited (as the author's themselves acknowledge) and the options have a whiff of arbitrariness about them. Richard Bartle's taxonomy which divides players into four types (killers, achievers, socializers and explorers) is simpler, whilst providing the same benefit of being able to look at the core engagement players gets from a game (1996). Bartle's typology has mainly been used to study multiplayer games, so invoking it to study single player LPs might seem counterintuitive. It has however been expanded upon, and one avenue of exploration could whether LPers might not form a new type of player, for example a 'performer' player type. Furthermore its general tenant of having people engage with a certain game because they enjoy a particular type of dynamics could explain why different playertype LPers create different LPs. In an FPS an explorer LPer might focus on the scenery, an achiever on tactics to be better at the game and a socializer might simply enjoy the interaction they get with their audience when they post the video. Moreover it could both be hypothesized that viewers enjoy LPs by similar or very different playertypes from themselves more, because they either enjoy the same game elements or because they enjoy this new take on a game they enjoy.

Aesthetics and playertypes thus allow the study of LPs as paratexts in a way that can shed light on a variety of different questions, depending on what is focussed on. In the case study below they are primarily invoked to explain narrative elements in LPs based on the LPer as fitting within one of Bartle's playertypes to illustrate that particular approach.

3.3 Case Study: Characteristics of Crusader Kings II Let's Plays

Invoking the MDA framework the LPs featuring CKII are analysed in a small case study. In the next section some findings from this case study will be presented, using the different lenses of mechanics, dynamics and aesthetics to show why studying the game as a production tool is useful to understand LPs better. It should be reiterated that although relations are drawn between game elements and narrative elements in the videos, this is not meant to argue that this relation is a necessity. Rather they serve to show that some relation exists and that within the context of the material studied the conclusions drawn can be sustained. Therefore a contrast will often times be made with hypothetical other scenarios to make clear how these mechanics allow for the narrative choices in the LP, which would be impossible or far less likely without them.

3.3.1 Looking at the world

There are several LPs in which the player takes a moment to look at 'what's going on in the rest of the world' when there is a lull in the action. This makes the videos narrative less about the adventures and exploits of one dynasty through time, but about the whole world as an alternate history. This is epitomized in the so-called 'quantum leap' LPs, in which the LPer doesn't move from a character to

their heir upon their death, as the game intends. Instead they opt to get a random character assigned, which they will then play till that character's death, only to move on to another random character.

A mechanic that plays a big role in facilitating this is the camera and the visibility of the entire map. As discussed above the camera angle and the ability to control it freely within the game environment determines many artistic choices a LPer can make. In CKII the player views the game from a top down perspective, can freely move the camera to any point on the map and always sees the current state of all parts of the world. Compare this to a game like FACTORIO (Wube Software 2016) where a similar top down perspective is used, but the player's camera angle is restricted to the movement of their avatar. Or to AGE OF EMPIRES (Ensemble Studios 1997), where the camera angle is free, but the so called 'fog of war' obscures the areas of the map where the player has no active units. In both these games the LPer is restricted to a focus on their own progress, making the narrative in LPs also far more likely to focus on this progress.

It is also important that the game is not going through a scripted series of events that might be influenced by the player. Instead the games' algorithm is a simulation that generates different possible outcomes every play through. Even though a player may be playing a count with a domain in Iceland, with no tangible influence in the south of India, the situation in India may change drastically every game. Had this not been the case it wouldn't have been a worthwhile narrative choice, since the world would be more or less the same every video series.

By no means all LPers do a regular overview of what is going on in the world however and one explanation may be found in aesthetics. An explorer type player can discover the alternate history that unfolds in their particular game, and looking at it is something they find enjoyable. To an achiever type player this only becomes relevant when it helps them be better at the game, and what is happening on the other side of the map is hardly ever relevant in that respect.

3.3.2 MEANINGFUL CHOICES

In CKII LPs the LPers go to great lengths to explain the choices they make to their audiences, often pausing the game and thus stopping the visual action when doing so. The reason they do so is because they feel that the choices they make are relevant and worth elaborating upon within the narrative of the LP.

Mechanically the game not only facilitates pausing, but more importantly the game dynamics make it a smart choice to often pause, whether narrating or not. For example players will often pause the game when war is declared on them, since a series of actions, such as raising their own armies, have to be carried out as soon as possible in order to be in the best position to win the war. They also need to determine their tactic for the war, and having the game paused gives them as much time as they need to do this. An important effect of this is that they can elaborate on these tactical choices within their narration to a far greater degree, which all LPers in this study did every time they went to war. As

Lucat and Haahr explain when looking at the ideologies at work in CKII the 'player's unhindered control over [the game's] progression adds further credibility to the simulation' (2015, 8). In other words; by giving the player this control they also gain an agency that facilitates a greater buy-in in the game world.

The player also needs enough information in order for them to feel they are actually given a fair chance by the game[4]. In CKII players are shown in percentages what the effects of their choice for a certain event will be (character gets trait X, lose/gain this much gold, etc.) if they hover over the choices presented with in-universe flavour text. Rather than being cast in the roll of the character they're playing, the player is thus giving a meta-perspective on the choices and can choose with a certain degree of foreknowledge of the effects. These dynamics filters through to the LPs, since because the LPer perceives these choices as meaningful and their own, they are more inclined to justify them to their audience.

The fact that they find such a choice meaningful is a clear link to the aesthetics as well. A socializer type LPer might not care all that much about how well they do in the game. However CKII does not really cater to those socializers, and even if a LPer would opt to simply keep going without pausing or discussing their choices, their audience would likely find they were simply playing the game poorly. The different player types can also provide a further distinction between narrative choices here, since although all LPers have access to the foreknowledge of the effects of certain choices, not all make the choices based on the same logic. Most LPers will read the flavour text aloud and then also discuss the results of the different options before they explain their choice. Some however approach these choices from a role-play perspective, and base their choice on the perceived personality of their character and the narrative content of the flavour text, regardless of the results. This creates a huge difference in the narrative of the LP, the latter is a video depicting the epic adventure of a character, the LPer as an actor. The former is a video that shows tactical considerations when playing the game, the LPer as player.

3.3.3 SETTING GOALS

A key mechanical choice made by the designers of CKII is the lack of a clear goal for the player. This leaves players with the need to formulate their own goals. As is evidenced in many online discussions on CKII forums about challenging starting positions (see for example Reddit 2013 and Reddit 2015) and even competitions who can achieve a certain feat the fastest (see for example Totalwar.org 2012). This dynamic makes the game less about playing the game until reaching the end date or until the

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[4] Dynamics thus aren't only created by the way the game works, but also by how they are presented to the player. That is not to say that the art style or music necessarily change dynamics (although they do influence the general state of mind in which a player makes decisions on mechanics), rather the availability of information about certain mechanics does.

whole world is conquered (though these LPs certainly also exist), but about achieving a self-determined goal.

This influence is visible in LPs as the lack of an end goal defined by the game allows LPers to set their own goal, varying from series to series. In this way LPers can diversify their series from one another by shaping the narrative of the LP around this goal, labelling it for example as 'Doge of the Hill' when playing as a Venetian doge, or 'Zoroastrian Persia' when attempting to restore that empire. This means that audiences are not simply presented with yet another LP about CKII, but with a new story they can go watch. The videos' titles, as well as thumbnails are used by some LPers to communicate this distinction even more clearly to potential viewers. When they opt to then watch it the audience has an idea of the motivations of the player and is with them on a quest, rather than just watching someone play a game indefinitely. Adding to this the fact the developer regularly releases downloadable content (DLC) which allows different types of characters to be played or adds new mechanics for certain groups, achiever LPers are presented with new types of challenges they can go for and explorer type LPers new mechanics to discover.

3.3.4. DARK HUMOR

A staple of the gaming culture around CKII is a somewhat morbid sense of humour derived from the fact that in the game the player often resorts to morally reprehensible actions like murdering children or incestuous relations. The mechanic that underlies this is the inheritance system which distributes titles to others when a character dies, based on family relations. As players usually want to get more titles they are tempted to murder and intermarry whomever to inherit more titles themselves and prevent other characters from doing so. This can be seen within what game studies scholar Ian Bogost calls 'procedural rhetoric', which discusses the way in which a simulation's mechanics give rise to different narratives (2007). Though far more complex and far reaching in its ideas of using games to unpack ideologies, it here serves to underline that certain dynamics present a certain ideology or narrative. Rather than unpacking an ideology by playing through it, the narrative clashes directly with the ideology of the player.

These type of actions feature prominently in the LPs, with humour resulting from the LPers discussing the devious actions they are about to undertake, often acknowledging this tension themselves. The perceived audience of the LPer is apparently in the know, since they do not bother to justify why it does not bother them to murder a child. On the other hand those LPers who present their LP as a role-play may look into it deeper and justify a kind character murdering a heathen because they are also zealous. The narrative choices for the LPers are thus framed by the way the game presents its dynamics, but allow different LPers to create different type of paratexts.

4. STUDYING LET'S PLAY PRODUCERS

In the last chapter the usefulness of studying the production of LPs through the lens of the games they're produced with and a paratext to was discussed. It was shown that dissecting games as the primary tools with which LPs are created allows us to explain the differences between them better. In this chapter the LPers themselves are studied, coming to a first categorization of them as producers and showing its potential as a starting point for further research.

4.1 CONVERGENCE CULTURE & THE LONG TAIL

The term convergence culture was coined by the American media scholar Henry Jenkins in his seminal work *Convergence Culture: Where old and new media collide* (2006). It describes how through the advent of new type of media the process of cultural production is changed and disrupted. It is often used interchangeably with participatory culture, and the basic concept is indeed the same. Both posit that in the old model of mass media production the content is made by producers who broadcast it to a largely passive audience who simply 'consumes' it. Conversely in the new model of participatory culture the audience themselves become active producers of content, as described by Jenkins in his much earlier *Textual Poachers* (1992) on fan communities. Participatory culture is therefore often seen as a democratization of cultural production, allowing viewers to retake power from media corporations and the ideological norms in their content (Ibid 221). This, however, seems to imply, just like convergence culture's subtitle, that the old and new ways of media production are fundamentally at odds and will 'collide'. And although tensions do indeed arise, as is also discussed below, Jenkins makes clear that 'we should be concerned with the flow between the two [broadcast and grassroots media]', because both models have their own strengths and weaknesses (2006, 257).

A useful way of visualizing this flow is the 'long tail', a term coined by *Wired* editor Chris Anderson (2004). It states that whereas before only content with mass appeal distributed through big channels was viable (the mountain), the ability to reach and connect with niche groups allowed much more type of content to be produced (the long tail)(see figure 2). Jenkins explains that this is basically the same mechanic that underlies convergence culture and fandom; being able to connect with people with the same interest (2007). Using this frame to understand the different types of producers of LPs allows a more nuanced approach than simply trying to divide them between amateurs and professionals or old and new ways of producing (cf. Burgess and Green 2009 55:57), because it posits a scale rather than a dichotomy.

By using the notion of the long tail to interpret the findings of the textual analysis, it can be employed as a method of studying the producers of LPs. This is premised on the idea that the differences between producers can be discerned within the videos. For example with LP videos this can be seen in

certain LPers using, among other elements, catchphrases to start and end their videos with. When this is coupled with metatextual elements like number of views or subscribers to determine popularity as a long tail element, different groups can be discerned based on a qualitative assessment, allowing for a more useful framework to work with.
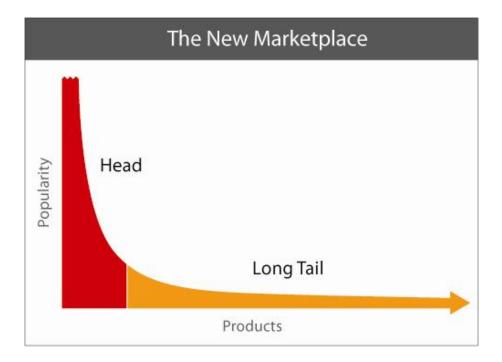

Figure 2: The Long Tail (source: www.longtail.com)

4.2 Enabling technology

Before moving on to presenting such a scale and the discussion of the different types of LP producers discernable, let's have a short look at the technological framework which enabled the development of this long tail. For LPs YouTube (and to a lesser degree other video sharing sites) provides the main framework, giving everyone the possibility to upload and share their videos, without requiring the technological knowledge and financial investment of creating a personal website with a video player. Moreover it is a central place for audiences to go to find and watch videos, making it a 'communicative space and community [...] rather than an inert distribution platform for content' (Burgess and Green 2009 69).

Besides the ability to easily find and connect with other fans or audiences, the availability of production technologies plays a role in the development of a participatory culture. For example the introduction of affordable video cameras for personal use allowed people to start making home movies in the late 1970s. In the case of LPs this means having a computer that is powerful enough to run a game and video capture software at the same time, a microphone to record sound, video editing software and knowledge on how to use it and access to the internet to upload it to a video sharing

website. All of these are now far more widely available than they were a decade ago; most notebooks come with a built-in microphone, home computers are far more powerful, there is plenty of free video capturing and editing software available (or pre-installed on PCs), etc. Had this not been the case it might be conceivable that LPs would have taken a different form, for example with text overlays edited in instead of voice overs. Or only people who already had access to professional recording devices or distribution platforms making them.

4.3 CATEGORIZING LET'S PLAY PRODUCERS

To categorize LP producers[5] using the idea of long tail in its simplest form could be done by placing the most viewed on the one side and videos with only a few views on the other side. This is however not particularly insightful besides showing that there is indeed a small group of uploaders with a lot of views, and a large group with comparatively little views. It doesn't tell us much about the difference in audiences, videos and producers. What was noticeable during this study was that although the more professional LPers were more towards the head of the tail, the real head was made up of uploaders that did not primarily focus on LPs. Instead LPs were more of a side project to their other online activities. This difference is what Kozinets, Hemetsberger and Schau label as the difference between a *telo-specific orientation*, which focuses on producing a certain product, and a *commune-ludic orientation*, where the product arises as a byproduct of another activity (2008, 344).Viewing this from the perspective of the long tail it is interesting to note that existing structures of production thus seem to be a key determining factor in the popularity of a LP, whilst for these groups it is part 'the normal routine' (Ibid) and it is the other groups that purposefully innovate and create the a specific format for LPs.

A second dimension is added when looking how these groups then fit within convergence culture. Here it is noticeable that LPs are often produced with multiple different people or distributed via a channel shared by multiple LPers. This results in videos with more than one narrator, one LP series played by a different LPer per entry, and followers of LP channels rather than individual LPers. These different types of LPs cannot be adequately presented within the same horizontal axis, but do show an important relation in the ways LPers relate to one another. A second axis is therefore added to visualize this relation (see figure 3).

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[5] In order to develop a scale on which the different producers of LPs can be discussed, the analysis had to be extended beyond the results gained from CKII. Although the main framework did arise within this study, it was found that some distinctly different groups of producers (such as YouTube celebrities) were not present in the sample. The scope of this thesis made it impossible to expand the sample to adequately represent all these groups, they have nevertheless been included here as full groups, rather than opting to exclude them in favor of methodological purity. Since this research is exploratory it was felt that this provided a more useful framework to build on in future studies and that this was more important than providing the most exact overview here.
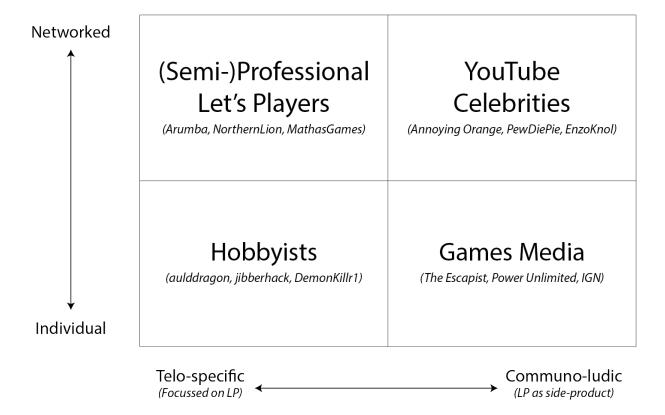
Networked

(Semi-)Professional Let's Players *(Arumba, NorthernLion, MathasGames)*	YouTube Celebrities *(Annoying Orange, PewDiePie, EnzoKnol)*
Hobbyists *(aulddragon, jibberhack, DemonKillr1)*	Games Media *(The Escapist, Power Unlimited, IGN)*

Individual

Telo-specific
(Focussed on LP)   ←——————→   Communo-ludic
                                          (LP as side-product)

Figure 3: Types of Let's Play producers

A two-dimensional structure such as this can never adequately represent the fluidity of the different LPers, with hobbyists becoming professionals, professional LPers taking their place amongst YouTube celebrities and YouTube celebrities becoming media outlets of their own. Nevertheless it does present a useful conceptualization of the types of LP producers discerned at this moment in time, based on the differences in their videos.

4.3.1. HOBBYISTS

To start with there is the least 'professional' group, the Hobbyists. They form a large quantity of the people uploading LPs, and their videos range from those with a couple of hundred views to those with a few thousand. What makes them primarily hobbyist however, is the fact that they make no or negligible amounts of money from their LPs. This is not to say that someone in the other groups could not make a LP as a hobby and choose not to earn anything. The hobbyists can however not do the reverse, since they simply have too little clout to make much money. They can of course have the ambition to do so, but if they want to achieve this they are very likely to have to adopt practices that place them in one of the other groups.

4.3.2. (Semi-)professional LPers

Separating the professionals from the hobbyist, (semi-)professional LPers have elements of (personal) branding and other elements that appear to be borrowed from television series. They upload videos in episodes of about similar length, often at intervals known to their fans, so they can come back to watch the next instalment when it comes out. In some cases these episodes are also given a title that reflects what is going on in them, making them not just the next moment in the play through, but rather the next chapter in the story. The different series these LPers do are also recognizable by a different graphic used as thumbnail for a series, making them recognizable as belonging together within the YouTube interface. Moreover professionalization is not just about making the series stand-out, the LPers themselves also becomes a brand. Professional LPers invariable use certain catchphrases to begin or end an episode. And the logo they use in their channel's YouTube avatar becomes a sign of quality used as watermark or in the starting visual of their videos.

A similar situation was discerned with machinima and cinema, with machinimators professionalizing their practices by borrowing from 'real' film productions (Pinchbeck & Gras 2011 155-156). Likewise this is not a simple one-to-one adoption of practices from another medium, rather it constitutes a mash-up of that which worked elsewhere, with the needs of the new medium. In the case of machinima larger projects required collaboration of multiple people with distinct skillsets to make them, these larger teams then took on a form that was more similar to that known in cinema (Ibid 153). For LPs the rise of grounded production practices allowed them to move away from being hobbyists who simply upload a recording of their game with them talking over it, towards a recognizable format in its own right. Moreover this professionalization allowed LPers to build up a fan base, with audiences knowing what they'll be presented with and when they'll get it.

These practices are what make them constitute more of a group than hobbyists, with recognizable features for their format. This is not just something happening in individual videos, but something professional LPers actively make happen by working together in a variety of ways. Some LPers bond together in channels like 'Lets Play' as a common platform to distribute their content with. Others appear in each other's videos or do shared LP series. This creates an interplay between LPers that has them recognize one another and form a distinct network of LP producers.

4.3.3 YouTube celebrities

YouTube celebrities are somewhat different from the already discussed group in that they operate under different conditions. Professional LPers started as hobbyist and professionalized their practices as they became more experienced and the genre of LP developed. Current hobbyists may be the future's professionals. Conversely YouTube celebrities already were massive hits on YouTube (for example because they produced vlogs or sketch videos), and only started doing LPs as something extra. Although they may have started as amateur uploaders on YouTube, they didn't start as amateur

LPers. They already had an audience to which they could distribute their LPs, in this they are more like mass media producer sending information to a passive group.

Professional LPers become successful (and thus able to be professional) because they adopt certain production practices, YouTube celebrities don't have to do so, because they are already successful for different reasons. This is not to say that they don't adopt them, they do, but the reason why they do so is not because they need to, but because this makes it fit better with subculture of LPs they want to profit from. LPs by YouTube celebrities therefore not necessarily assume that their audience is familiar with the game they are playing, since they are aware their audience does not come primarily to their channel for these LPs, but for them. These LPs often focus more on the persona of the LPer, than on the game they are playing, creating a different type of LP.

They do however fit within the larger picture of convergence culture as individuals who have risen to become popular within the context of online video sharing. They recognize one another and their LPs may feature other people, often their friends, in a way that makes it more than a solo endeavour.

4.4.4 GAMES MEDIA

The last type of LPers are the games media, mainly online platforms which distribute gaming news via articles and/or videos, which now also have their editors do LPs. As media they recognized a new phenomenon within their subject area and decided to also start engaging their audiences with this type of content. Although often multiple editors will be playing together it is still largely disconnected from the wider community. They are competing with other outlets for their audience's attention, rather than being part of the online community (be it LPer or YouTubers). In this is follows more strongly the logic of mass media of them sending content and the audiences receiving and consuming it, not interested in LPs in themselves, but in LPs as a new revenue stream they can tap into.

5. STUDYING LET'S PLAYS' PRODUCTION CONTEXT

An often studied part of participatory culture is its relation with traditional content producers. Jenkins choosing to name his book 'Textual Poachers' already calls to mind illegal hunters skulking around a lord's forest. A quite apt image of the lowly and powerless encroaching on the perceived right of a powerful hegemon to their possession. Similarly fan communities question the right of producers to control every aspect of their intellectual property (1992 30:33). They become so attached to the object of their fandom that they consider it partly 'theirs' as well (Consalvo 2003 79). This last chapter will focus on this tension by looking at the production context of LPs.

LPs will be studied as part of a culture of online video sharing, with different actors (game producers, platform owners, fans, etc.) exerting different types of power. Using the categorization of LP producers discussed above the interplay between LP producers and the traditional stakeholders is outlined. Placing LPs within the wider phenomenon of convergence culture to show that as old production practices 'collide' with new ones the power exertion of traditional stakeholders and new ones shapes the types of LPs produced (Jenkins 2006).

Two types of powerful stakeholders are particular of interest for LPs; the platform they operate on (YouTube) and the developers/producers of the games they play (see also Schäfer 2009 126). Therefore there will first be looked at the platform and why it is important to consider. Secondly the various ways in which developers deal with participatory culture are discussed.

5.1 YOUTUBE: ENABLING AND LIMITING

Above the technological framework of YouTube as an enabling technology for participatory has already been discussed. The flipside of having one such a central place for all these videos is that the company that owns the platform also has control over the type of content allowed on it. Via its Terms of Service and Community Guidelines YouTube for example determines that videos with violent or graphic content are not allowed. Although 'citizen journalism' is allowed, other 'gory content that's primarily intended to be shocking' is forbidden, with YouTube the undisputed arbiter of journalistic merit (YouTube 2010). Besides these legal possibilities, YouTube also limits uploaders via the technology, which is not neutral either. What is and is not made possible by it profoundly influences the content that can be created (Consalvo 2003, 73). For example users are limited to uploading videos of 15 minutes unless they verify their account with a phone number, or only certain video formats being supported as upload files. These things are not just prohibited, they are actually impossible to do. It is the difference between speeding being illegal and modifying a car to never exceed the maximum speed. A clear example of traditional stakeholders exerting control via such technological means is an algorithm that recognizes copyrighted music in uploaded videos and automatically disables the sound. So it is not just disallowed to upload videos with copyrighted music, it is actively

impossible to do so.

So on the one hand YouTube being a social network for videos (Burgess & Green 2009 53) allowed it to become a site of convergence culture it is, but at the same time its dominance in the field forces people to play by its rules or be shut out.

5.2 TYPES OF COLLISION

From the previous it may seem that the cooperations (whether platform or developer) hold all the power and use it to strong arm grassroots producers into conforming to their ideals. Although it is partly true that existing legal structures tend to favour the content owner's rights, this doesn't mean fan producers are powerless, or that all companies are fervently opposed to them. Both the LP producers and their audiences are fans (and customers) of the companies whose content they use. Moreover they are some of the most dedicated ones, being so infatuated with a franchise that they want even more content than is already out there. Antagonizing them is contrary to a developer's own interest. Therefore companies often seek other ways to exert some measure of control, which gives them some influence, but also harnesses the power of participatory culture.

In his dissertation *Bastard Culture!* participatory culture scholar Mirko Schäfer categorizes these reactions to user participation as confrontation, implementation and integration (2009, 126). Confrontation is the shutting out of new ways of production to maintain the old systems of production. It is trying to disempower audiences and have them remain passive consumers of the content in the way it was intended by the producer. It is highly noticeable to the audience since it is mainly done via legal means that attempt to remove content they enjoy, leading to vocal reactions from fans (see also Consalvo 2003, 78-79 and Jenkins 1992, 31). Conversely implementation attempts to incorporate these new types of production into the existing structure in an attempt to control them. An example Schäfer gives here is LucasArts providing a platform where fans can create and upload their own videos, but LucasArts gets exclusive rights to these videos and only content they provide may be used (2009, 148-150). Fans productions are here not encouraged for their creativity or benefit for the community, but as an asset that can be monetized. Lastly integration is the full adoption of new practices to build a business strategy around. Wikipedia is a clear example here, not just allowing users to edit some articles, but actually working from the premise that everything on it is fan produced and drawing strength from crowdsourcing knowledge.

When dealing with LPs these mind-sets manifest themselves in a variety of ways, which together draw a picture of the context in with which LPs are produced, each of these will now be looked at in turn.

5.2.1 CONFRONTATION

Based on the idea of exclusive ownership confrontation a few companies (notably SEGA (Techdirt 2012)) have attempted to have videos with their games in it taken down outright. Not only LPs were

targeted, but basically any video that had content they deemed their property was taken down by YouTube per their request. Even videos that used this content for review purposes were taken down, targeting many independent game critics, whilst videos by established outlets were left untouched. Though there is no clear case of the LPs of some being taken down in favour of others, this comparison shows the general attitude, where those groups already considered part of the games industry occupy a privileged position due to their relation with developers. This relation has been the topic of critique for a while (cf. Nieborg & Sihvonen 2009), mainly because it calls into question the journalistic integrity of these media.

In all these cases the producers quickly back peddled on their decision after outcries by fans, showing that although they may be legally within their right, fans do possess the power to change policy. This is because the confrontational strategy is highly visible and antagonizes the own fan base.

5.2.2 IMPLEMENTATION

Most developers therefore turn to practices of implementation in order to exert control over their content. Sometimes this happens in a way in which the main mind-set is actually that of confrontation, claiming complete ownership. Before the release of the hack-'n-slash game MIDDLE EARTH: THE SHADOW OF MORDOR (Monolith Productions 2014) media outlets, YouTube celebrities and professional LPers (noticeably all on the right side of the amateur-professional scale) were only offered review copies of the game if they signed a brand deal. This deal included detailed descriptions of what should be paid attention to in the video and committed the video's makers to positive coverage of the game on their social media outlets, as well as having their video approved by the developer before publishing it (The Escapist 2014). However even in cases where developers do not actively attempt to control the content of videos produced by those they give copies, they still provide only a select group of LP producers content that makes their channel more appealing to their audience. These LPers are often the ones in the professional group and they thus gain an even stronger position, making it harder for hobbyists, who don't get such exclusive content, to attract an audience of their own.

A different example of implementation provided by the platform is the YouTube monetization scheme. With it developers can opt to not have copyrighted material taken down, but rather to receive the revenue produced by the ads in and around the video. Nintendo here presents an interesting case for LPs. The company first wholly claimed the proceedings of any LP video with their games in it, thus making it impossible for LPers to earn anything from their videos (IGN 2013). Within such a framework the group of professional LP producer could never have developed. Since then Nintendo has changed its policy, and instead began the Nintendo Creators Program (Nintendo 2015) which allows LPers to share in the revenue. Important to note here is that rather than doing this via the YouTube monetization options, the company has instead set up a separate program, first collecting all the money themselves and only the distributing a share to the LPer. With this the company attempts to

move part of the practice to an infrastructure they control. Moreover only certain games are included in it and the terms of the deal are dictated by the company.

Here it is seen how implementation keeps the logic of the old media, with the developers in control and attempting to only allow fan involvement when they can control it. They thus enforce a stricter separation between what otherwise might have been an even more fluid group of hobbyists and professionals, making it harder for people to move from one group to the other. On the other hand LPers that do have a large enough audience have enough clout to also impact developer's decisions by speaking out when they are malcontent.

5.2.3 INTEGRATION

Lastly the logic of integration is clearly at work in the streaming platform Twitch.TV (Twitch n.d.), which provides a dedicated platform for livestreamed LPs. Its success stand in stark contrast with the often lukewarm reaction that players had to games that allowed them to upload outtakes of their exploits to a dedicated section of a developers website. This latter example worked on a logic of implementation, attempting to have players use a platform controlled by the developers. Twitch on the other hand allows for all kinds of games to be streamed with it, and is not affiliated with any developer directly. This does not make it a neutral actor, and more akin to YouTube in the ways in which it forms the production of LPs. However as an enabling technology it provides more hobbyists the opportunity to move into livestream LPs, which YouTube doesn't offer. It thus opens up a new way of production and distribution to a far wider group, allowing them to experiment and create new types of LPs.

6. CONCLUSION & OUTLOOK

In this thesis three approaches to the study of Let's Play videos have been proposed and their usefulness investigated. It was shown that when LPs are seen as paratext to their game, the workings of that specific game allow for a more detailed analysis of the LP. Based both on what a game makes technologically possible in its design, but also on how the player-game interaction of that particular game shapes the production of the LP.

By looking further at the different types of producers that make LPs it was furthermore argued that LPs are not only a niche made by enthusiastic hobbyist who go pro, but also by other types of producers. The framework put forth differentiates clearly between those who focus on LPs and in doing so have come to innovate and shape the format, and those that stepped in later. In this way the differences in their videos may also be explained, such as a different focus on drama over gameplay when the perceived audience is not solely composed of gamers. Moreover by looking at the networked aspect of LPers as groups it was shown they are not just competing for an audience's attention, like games media, but rather seem to form a certain community.

In the last chapter this framework was then utilized further to look at the broader production context of LPs. Their relation with the platform they have to operate on as well as the developers whose games they use was shown to play a key role in the transition between hobbyist and professional LPer.

Being an explorative study with a limited scope the proposed approaches could not be demonstrated in detail. Although every chapter demonstrates certain finding that might be done when taking this approach, these findings are not meant to be exhaustive in their claims. The small case study conducted in chapter three is the clearest example here, which does provide certain useful results relating to the studied LPs of CKII, but not in such a way that they constitute a full blown exploration of all the ways in which the game's workings influence LPs. Furthermore in the fourth and fifth chapter a tension arose between the use of the textual analysis and the study of production practices. Although it is certainly possible to distinguish producers based on the differences in their LPs, this method obscures any influences on the production context that are not directly apparent in the videos.

Worthwhile further research could therefore take the framework as it currently stands, and use it as a starting point for a more producer oriented study. This type of study might consist of interviews with LPers or an ethnographic account of their practices. From there the various production contexts can be charted further, potentially leading to new found influences on LPs, which can in turn be starting points for different types of inquiry.

Such a study could alternatively take a more networked approach and look at the interplay between different groups of producers. How such a network would be charted depends largely on the theoretical framework employed. One useful way might be drawing more on the theories proposed in chapter three. Looking at LPers as player types (or LPers as a type in themselves) and seeing how

these different LPers create different videos, or are more likely to belong to different groups. Another approach would look not just at LPers, but at their audiences and the larger gaming community as well. Treating LPs as hubs within a social network for fans that also congregate on message boards, websites or conventions. This type of research would serve to underline that LPs and its practices did not just develop out of nowhere, but might be construed as a continuation of those fan practices in different places.

Another limitation in scope of this thesis meant that only a number of videos from different LPers and different series could be analysed. Only an episode within each series was looked at. Further research could opt to do a comparative study of two full playthroughs and look at the narrative structure not just within the video, but within the series. This places it more firmly within the field of television studies and LPs could be seen as either episodes, seasons or whole series of the same producer. This type of study could not only yield explanations for differences between a first and a thirtieth video in a series, but also take into account the audience of such a video as fans of a particular series or LPer.
When looking at narrative within the videos the rhetoric was also left out of the considerations here, but could potentially warrant a study in itself. It was noted for example that most (though not all) LPers use 'we' and 'our' when playing, as if the audience has a certain influence on the action. The use of jargon is a different example, creating those that are 'in the know' and part of the audience, and those that aren't. Such a study with thus show that these rhetorics are thus not neutral plays of words, but through them LPers may create a sense of community that can be investigated further in its use of language.

Lastly the LPer themselves can be focussed on not as a producer of videos, but as a performer. Some preliminary work in this respect has already been done (cf. Glas 2015), but drawing on the approaches put forth in this study it becomes apparent that many areas are of yet unstudied. Again the LPer as performing playertype within Bartle's framework may shed light on how play by LPers differs from regular play. Compare for example the discussion within film studies on the possibility of a documentary maker to be objective, with the question whether the play performance of a LPer is an objective representation of their play style.
Placing it more within the theories from the fifth chapter on the other hand allows a study of performativity to look deeper at the added creative value of the LPer and what this means for their role within gaming culture. Future actions by developers, fans and possibly even legal rulings will mark this ongoing discussion on ownership.

As the format of LP matures its format, its producers, its fans and gaming culture will continually change and develop. This thesis has put forth a few different approaches, which each look at different parts of this development, to begin to adapt the media scholar's tools in examining this fascinating phenomenon.

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