



# The Engaged Gamer

An Exploration of Consumers' Engagement and its  
Consequences for the Video Game Industry's Strategic  
Brand Management

Oskar Leander & Dominik Weber

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## Abstract

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**Supervisor:** Mats Urde

**Examiner:** Frans Melin

**Title:** The Engaged Gamer: An exploration of consumers' engagement and its consequences for the video game industry's strategic brand management

**Authors:** Oskar Leander & Dominik Weber

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**Purpose:** *The purpose of this research is to understand the phenomenon of the engaged gamer, that we term video gamer's engagement beyond purchase and playing games and how it affects the strategic brand management in the video game industry.*

**Theoretical Perspective:** *The study relates engagement to strategic brand management, including the creation of a brand identity within the production process of video games. It allows to reflect, include and foresee the impact of gamers' engagement on video game brands, including their identity, communication, reputation and positioning along the production process and lifecycle.*

**Methodology:** *This study features an abductive, qualitative and exploratory research design. In a first step, a typology of engaged gamers is created to understand and classify gamers' engagement behaviours, based on a micro-ethnography including in-depth interviews with engaged gamers. In a second step, two (2) qualitative case studies based on a secondary data analysis are employed to identify how gamers' engagement affect the process of strategic brand management in the industry. Finally, this paper triangulates these two parts through a thematic data analysis to elucidate how different types of engaged gamers affect the strategic brand management.*

**Findings:** *The study finds that engaged gamers affect brand building in the video game industry through co-creation, social, influencing and observing engagement behaviours, both positively and negatively. Their strategic importance can be assessed with the Brand Impact of Gamer Engagement model and situated in the video game production process with the proposed Brand Building and Engagement Wheel. Engaged gamers need to be seen as internal and external stakeholders and influence brand identity, communication, reputation and positioning.*

**Theoretical Contribution:** *The study bridges the gap between strategic brand management and the engagement concept by conceptualising the Brand Building and Engagement Wheel, that highlights the relation of engagement on a brand's identity, communication and reputation. Furthermore, the paper determines gamers' impact on brands as enhancement, collateral damage, attack or constructive criticism, based on their intentions.*

**Managerial Implications:** *As engagement occurs persistently, brand management needs to continuously address engaged gamers through communication aligned with identity. Furthermore, due to the service transformation in the industry, video game brands need to be based on an identity designed for both continuity and change.*

**Originality/Value:** *This study explores for the first time empirically the phenomenon of the engaged gamer from a strategic brand management perspective, bridging the research gap between strategic brand management, the concept of engagement, video game studies and the video game industry.*

**Keywords:** Strategic Brand Management, Engagement, Video Games, Digital Games



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*Finally, we want to warm-heartedly thank our friends and families for their great support and ongoing encouragement.*

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Oskar Leander".

Oskar Leander

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dominik Weber".

Dominik Weber



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## 1. Introduction

This chapter introduces the reader to the background of the study and highlights its relevancy. Furthermore, it introduces the aim and objectives of the paper, linking them to relevant authors and pointing out the research gap.

Huizinga argued in 1938 that we entered the era of the *homo ludens*, the playing man. Nowadays, games surround mankind at any given moment; be it the latest *FIFA* video game<sup>1</sup> at home, *Counter Strike: Global Offensive* at the DreamHack Summer event, *World of Warcraft* online or *Angry Birds* on a mobile phone. It is a world in which the magic circle, the membrane separating the real from the game (Huizinga 1938, Castranova 2008), is disappearing – the rules, realities and more importantly, values from within games are carried over to the outside world. With over 2.1 billion people playing video games (Newzoo 2016a), effectively delineating more than a quarter of earth's population, gaming constitutes a major phenomenon of our time.

However, gaming is not only a cultural phenomenon, but also an economic: Since 1983, the industry did not experience a single year without growth (Zackariasson and Wilson 2010). The video game industry now constitutes the world's largest entertainment industry, surpassing both music and movies, and is expected to grow to a total volume of US\$112.5bn by 2018 (Newzoo 2016c). Throughout the history of video games, players have always taken a very active role: Whether it is through modifying the game, or through active participation in social activities and community life. In fact, gamers' engagement defined the industry as a whole (Galloway 2007, Levy 2010). Consequently, the phenomenon of gamers' engagement beyond purchase and consumption can hardly be referred to as a recent development.

The Internet, however, has supported the development of international communities focusing on the video game medium, sharing experiences and opinions both privately and publicly (Christodoulides 2009, Berthon *et al.* 2012). It largely increased the participatory power consumers can exert (Jenkins 2006, Christodoulides 2009, Cova *et al.* 2011), closely related to the increasingly blurry line between consumers, companies and other stakeholders (Jaakkola and Alexander 2014). Nonetheless, engaged gamers are not limited to online or participation in social forums. Nowadays, gamers' engagement stretches far beyond the game:

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<sup>1</sup> For this paper, we utilise the term video games in its broadest understanding, including all digital games.



They participate in eSports events held in arenas, create extensive modifications which are then downloaded hundreds of millions of times (e.g. Burgess and Spinks 2014, Weber 2014) and share their experiences through streaming and YouTube – in fact, gaming and “YouTube mega-star” (Nutt 2016) PewDiePie was voted one of Time’s 100 most influential people in the world in 2016 (Parker 2016).

Indeed, we argue that there is a phenomenon of the engaged gamer, featuring an engagement that stretches beyond purchase and playing of games. Considering the influence, reach and social energy created by engaged gamers, they potentially threaten to damage brands in the video game industry severely (Behm *et al.* 2016). On the other hand, as attached consumers, they constitute valuable supporters of the brand, recommending it to others (Fedorikhin *et al.* 2008), creating value (Jeppesen 2004, Postigo 2007, 2010, Jaakkola and Alexander 2014) and, according to Keller (2009, 2013, p. 121) representing the “strongest affirmation of brand loyalty.”

Consequently, engaged gamers interact with brands and influence them - a phenomenon, that has been neglected by academic research so far. Burgess and Spinks (2014) constitute one of the few exceptions, concentrating on a theoretical application of Keller’s (2009, 2013) brand resonance theory to the video game industry. However, engagement behaviours as defined have only been mentioned shortly as one aspect. Accordingly, the strategic implications of engaged gamers and their behaviours for brands and brand management in the video game industry need further, empirically supported investigation.

Therefore, our study sets out to research the phenomenon of the engaged gamer from a strategic brand management perspective. The paper will focus on how and why gamers engage as a first step towards an understanding, before investigating the consequences and implications of their behaviours for the industry’s brand management.

### 1.1. Aim and Objectives

As pointed out, strategic brand management literature mostly ignored the video game industry to the present day. Brand-related research video games so far mostly focused on the effect of in-game advertisements (e.g. Nelson 2002, Moonhee Yang *et al.* 2006, Jusufović Karışık 2014). However, brand building and brand dimensions such as identity, communication, reputation and positioning (Kapferer 2012, Roper and Fill 2012, Keller 2013) have only been theoretically linked to the video game industry (Burgess and Spinks 2014).



Thus, there is a research gap between a multi-billion-dollar industry (Newzoo 2015) and strategic brand management literature.

While the phenomenon of the engaged gamers is situated within the industry and affecting the brand management (Behm *et al.* 2016), their behaviours are also directly linked to the concept of engagement (e.g. Brodie *et al.* 2011) and rooted within their motivations as defined in video game studies (Jansz and Tanis 2007, Tanis and Jansz 2008, Williams *et al.* 2008, Przybylski *et al.* 2010, Shaw 2010, Ratliff 2015). Consequently, to develop a better understanding of the phenomenon, we include the concept of engagement that received growing scientific attention during the last years (Hollebeek *et al.* 2016) and their underlying motivations.

Furthermore, the study needs to include the specific characteristics of the video game industry (e.g. Bates 2005, Le Diberder 2012, Marchand and Hennig-Thurau 2013), as these largely influence the interaction with gamers (Lane 2012). Accordingly, our investigation rests on a solid backdrop of the industry, providing the reader with the necessary insights to develop a better understanding of the phenomenon.

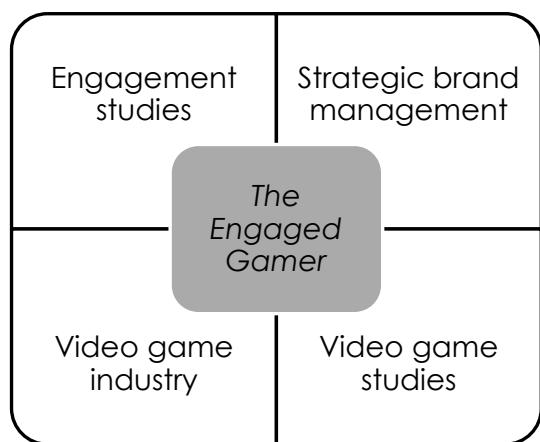


Figure 1: Positioning of the Phenomenon

To summarise, this study investigates the phenomenon of the engaged gamer from a strategic brand management perspective, using the concepts of engagement and motivation to create a better understanding of gamers' behaviours and their consequences within the video game industry.

Consequently, the aim of this study is to better understand the phenomenon of the engaged gamer, thereby contributing to the field of strategic brand management, linking it with the thriving research field of engagement in marketing. Accordingly, the following research questions are formulated to guide our study:

1. *Why and how do gamers engage with brands beyond purchase and consumption within the video game industry?*
2. *How does this engagement beyond purchase and consumption affect the strategic brand management in the video game industry?*



## 1.2. Outline of the Thesis

- I. The reader is introduced to the phenomenon of the engaged gamer, elucidating the background and aims, as well as the research questions.
- II. The second chapter provides an overview of the video game industry, its players, processes, business models and challenges to situate the phenomenon of the engaged gamer within its setting and context.
- III. The literature review gives an overview of relevant existing concepts and literature in the fields of marketing, management and video game studies. It highlights the importance of brand management and elaborates on gamers' engagement and motivations.
- IV. The chapter provides an overview of the abductive research approach used throughout a multiple methods design. In the first phase, in-depths interviews were conducted to enable us to delineate gamers' motivations and engagement types. In the second phase, two case studies based on a secondary data analysis are employed, using the previously reached insights to analyse the impact of engagement.
- V. The findings from the first phase are analysed and discussed, rooting gamers' engagement in four main motivational categories and linking them to four types of engagement behaviours.
- VI. In two case studies, the problematic launch of *SimCity* (2013) and the influence of co-creation behaviours on the re-rating of *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* are presented and analysed. Both cases clearly indicate the high potential engagement behaviours have in relation to a brand's reputation.
- VII. This chapter analyses the insights from both the case studies and the interviews, linking them to the current transformation in the video game industry. It discusses the results in regard to the existing literature and highlights the connecting position of our research, combining different fields of study in an interdisciplinary view.
- VIII. The conclusion chapter summarises the key findings and links them to the study's aim and purpose. Furthermore, it answers the research questions and points out managerial implications and further research directions.



## 2. Background: The Video Game Industry

*The aim of this chapter is twofold: Firstly, it provides an introduction to the video game industry, allowing readers that are not familiar with the business to get an overview of relevant actors, numbers, connections and developments. Secondly, it ‘sets the scene’ for the phenomenon of the engaged gamers, enabling the reader to better understand the background and, consequently, the engaged gamer himself.*

### 2.1. Introduction

The first forms of digital games appeared in the 1950's, but were generally not for entertainment purposes and not yet available to the masses (Lünendonk 2015), with the exception of *Tennis for Two* that was created to entertain guests of the Brookhaven National Laboratory (van Burnham and Baer 2003, Sihvonen 2011). In 1962, *Spacewar!* was completed: Developed by MIT student Steven Russell and others, it is often regarded as the first computer game and allowed players to battle each other with spaceships on a computer screen (Levy 2010, Sihvonen 2011). The video game industry as such emerged in the early 1970's, when Atari Inc. released *Pong*, the first commercially successful video game (Winter n.d., Sihvonen 2011, Simon 2012).

Today, the video game industry is globally the largest entertainment industry, bigger than music and movies put together. From the simple graphics and gameplay of *Pong* with its two paddles, a ball and a rotary control, games today can have budgets of over US\$200m (Superannuation 2014), with visuals and complex controls. About a quarter of the entire global population (Newzoo 2016d) is playing video games on different platforms in 2016, making the video game industry globally relevant.

### 2.2. Video Games

The Merriam-Webster dictionary (2016) defines video game simply as “an electronic game in which players control images on a television or computer screen.” While this is easy enough to comprehend, Alpert (2007) adds that entertainment software [referring to video games; A/N] is interactive, with longer consumption experience and higher initial cost than other entertainment products and has a learning curve as well as requiring some skill to enjoy.

Getting an overview of the different types of games created is a difficult task. While games can be divided into different genres (Alpert 2007, Ratliff 2015), much like music or movies,



these are too many to mention in the scope of this research and not expedient for the aim of our study. We agree with Ratliff (2015), who argues that genres are not the best way of classifying video games, as they are more often than not a combination of many different genres. Depending on how players choose to play the game, they can experience the same game completely differently.

One way to differentiate video games is to distinguish between indie and triple-A: Triple-A games are usually defined as games financed and produced by large publishers such as Ubisoft or Electronic Arts (e.g. Ratliff 2015, Marchand 2016). These games have enormous budgets, hundreds of people working on them (Ratliff 2015) and are usually marketed following a fixed or hybrid pricing model (Marchand 2016, cf. Table 2). Other researchers delineate triple-A titles as video games aiming at leading the sales ranking from the first week on, linking them to terms used by financial rating agencies (Le Diberder 2012). Indie, or independent, games are quite the opposite: They are usually made on a limited budget, by few developers and are sometimes crowdfunded or even self-financed (Ratliff 2015).

The platform, including both hardware and software platforms, on which the game is being played, can drastically change the way the gamer experiences the game (Schweizer 2014, Ratliff 2015). It also affects the industry, as games are often not compatible across different platforms or competing hardware systems (Gretz 2010) and consumers may need to own different platforms to play different games. Table 1 provides an overview of the different platforms and hardware systems competing for gamers.

Table 1: Overview of different gaming platforms

| Platform                 | Description                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | References                                                                                                                                 |
|--------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Personal Computer</b> | Computers running on operating systems such as Microsoft's Windows, Apple's OSX or Linux distributions are not made solely to play games, it is merely one of their functions. They are highly customisable with a broad range of hardware ranging from low-end, barely able to run video games, to high-end systems able to run resource-hungry games featuring advanced graphics and sophisticated artificial intelligence.            | Alpert 2007, Marchand and Hennig-Thurau 2013, Schweizer 2014, Ratliff 2015                                                                 |
| <b>Console</b>           | The current generation of consoles consists of the Sony PlayStation 4, Microsoft Xbox One & Nintendo Wii U. These are game systems attached to televisions. They are mass produced – one size fits all, with little room for customization. Many games are exclusive to one of the systems. Traditionally, this has led to each generation of consoles competing in cycles of seven (7) years before getting replaced by newer hardware. | Alpert 2007, Gretz 2010, Marchand and Hennig-Thurau 2013, Consumer Electronics Association 2014, Schweizer 2014, Ratliff 2015, Stuart 2016 |



|                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |                                                                                              |
|-----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Browser</b>  | Games that use browsers such as Firefox, Safari or Chrome as interface to display the game. This includes games on social media e.g. Facebook.                                                                                                                                                                             | Alpert 2007, Marchand and Hennig-Thurau 2013, Schweizer 2014, Ratliff 2015                   |
| <b>Mobile</b>   | The operating systems of smartphones; Google's Android, Apple's iOS and Microsoft's Windows Phone compete for the mobile gaming market. While phones are not made primarily to play video games, this is the industry's fastest growing market and newer phones are marketed with gaming being as important as the camera. | Alpert 2007, Marchand and Hennig-Thurau 2013, Ratliff 2015, Samsung Electronics 2016         |
| <b>Handheld</b> | The current handheld generation consists of Nintendo's 3DS suite, Nvidia's Shield and Sony's PlayStation Vita. These machines can connect to the respective company's console or PC, using their performance to deliver better gameplay.                                                                                   | Alpert 2007, Marchand and Hennig-Thurau 2013, Schweizer 2014, Stein 2015, TopTenReviews 2016 |

### 2.3. Market Overview

The video game industry can be regarded as a highly dynamic and healthily growing industry: It experienced a double digit growth between 1983 and 2008 (Zackariasson and Wilson 2010) and has grown incessantly ever since (PwC 2010, Reuters 2011, Newzoo 2013). From a size of US\$23bn in 2008, the global revenues in the video game market rose to US\$83.6bn in 2014 (Newzoo 2015), thus outperforming other entertainment industries, including the global box office revenues (US\$38.3bn; MPAA 2015). The market is expected to grow further and reach a total volume of US\$113.3bn by 2018 (Newzoo 2015).

The total number of players worldwide is expected to rise to 2.1bn in 2016 (Newzoo 2016a), out of which 78% purchase their games and game content digitally (Newzoo 2015). While most games are purchased digitally, only console games remain successful in selling physical boxed games (Newman 2015).

In 2014, the market was dominated by *computer screen* revenues accounting for 38% of the market and *entertainment screen* revenues (including consoles, television and virtual reality) accounting for 29% (Newzoo 2015). The next largest segment was constituted by *personal screens* (smartphones and smart watches) through which 20% of market revenues were realised (Newzoo 2015). Finally, according to Newzoo (2015), 13% of revenues were made with games for *floating screens* (handheld consoles and tablets).



### Market Share, by segment

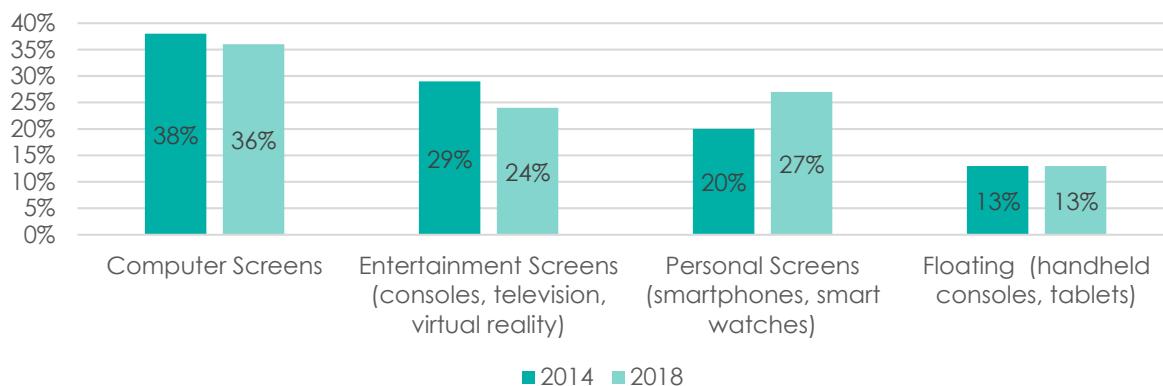


Abbildung 1: Market Share by segment

However, this distribution is expected to change dramatically over the next years: by 2018, mobile games (including both *floating screens* and *personal screens*) are expected to account for 40% of the total market revenues, with smartphone and smartwatch game revenues almost doubling to an estimated US\$30.2bn (Newzoo 2015). Nevertheless, gaming revenues on *entertainment* and *computer screens* are not expected to be marginalised: The former is forecasted to experience a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of by 2,3%, the latter of 6,9% (Newzoo 2015). According to Newzoo (2015), handheld gaming revenues are expected to dwindle by -22,5% CAGR, due to competition with smartphones that are getting increasingly powerful and proliferate (Stein 2015), thus making them the only segment to experience negative growth (Newzoo 2015).

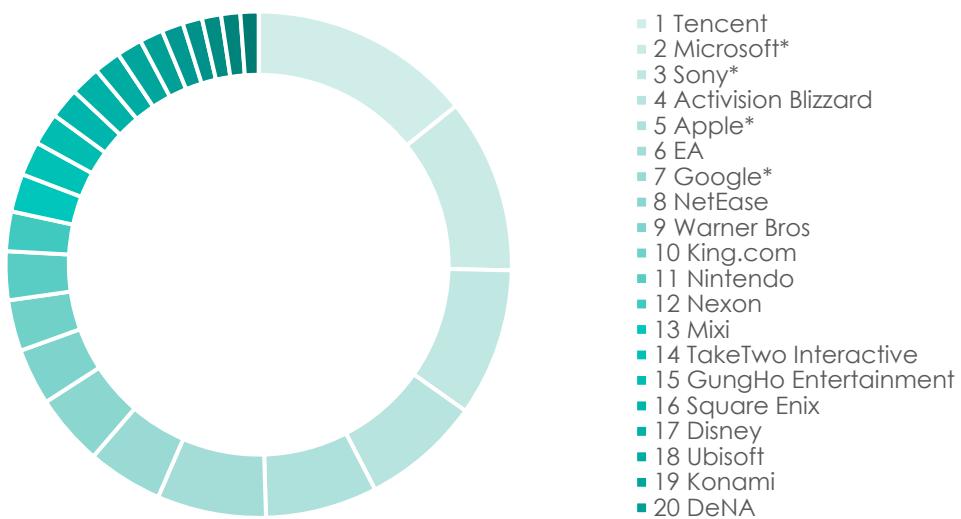


Figure 2: Largest 20 Companies by revenue

According to (Marchand and Hennig-Thurau 2013), the video game market can be regarded as an oligopoly dominated by a few large video game publishers. The revenue distribution



within the market reflects this finding, as the five (5) largest video game publishers alone account for US\$30.406bn and, thus, for almost 35% of the whole video game market revenues (Newzoo 2016d). The top ten (10) largest publishers account for US\$49.030bn and 55% respectively, while the top 25 publishers amass US\$65.758bn and account for almost 75% of market revenues (Newzoo 2016d).

## 2.4. The Video Game Industry

The video game industry can be “place[d] at the leading edge of new media development” (Flew and Humphreys 2008, p. 127) due to its interconnectivity with ongoing technological innovation (Marchand and Hennig-Thurau 2013), the highly appealing levels of immersion and interactivity and intense marketing practices (Flew and Humphreys 2008). This continuous development also leads to an industry characterised by different value-chain layers including game development, publishing, distribution, platforms and users that are interwoven and whose relations and interdependencies are in constant movement (Flew and Humphreys 2008).

Despite this complexity, six (6) distinct layers have been identified within the industry’s value chain, including the ‘capital and publishing layer’, the ‘product and talent layer’, the ‘production and tools layer’, the ‘distribution layer’, the ‘hardware layer’ and the ‘end-users layer’ (Flew 2008). However, these layers are connected (Flew and Humphreys 2008) and, considering recent developments such as crowdfunded games (Smith 2015), the rise of middleware<sup>2</sup> (Flew and Humphreys 2008) and the skyrocketing growth of mobile games (Newzoo 2015), the lines between them are becoming increasingly blurred. Nevertheless, a few major roles at the heart of the industry are identifiable (Parmentier and Mangematin 2009, Zackariasson and Wilson 2010, Simon 2012) and described hereinafter.

### 2.4.1. Developers

Developers and development studios are the actual creators of video games (Simon 2012). Well-known development studios include BioWare, Blizzard Entertainment, Digital Illusions CE and id Software. One can differentiate between first-party developers (Kerr 2006), sometimes referred to as in-house development studios (Simon 2012), second-party developers

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<sup>2</sup> Middleware refers to specialized hardware or software that facilitates the development of games. Graphic engines such as the Frostbyte engine provide a technical platform that only needs to be adapted to the respective game.



contracted to develop game concepts provided by a publisher and third-party developers developing games independently before either pitching them to publishers (Kerr 2006) or financing the game through equity (Ratliff 2015), loans (Bay 2015), crowdfunding (Smith 2015) or a combination of these. The development studios are also responsible for future upgrades and maintenance through patches<sup>3</sup> and updates (Bates 2005).

#### 2.4.2. Publishers

A second major role in the video game industry is the publisher, such as Electronic Arts, Activision Blizzard, TakeTwo Konami or Deep Silver. These companies either publish in-house developed games or games created by independent developers (e.g. Simon 2012, Thomes 2015). Usually, they are responsible for financing the development studios (Zackariasson and Wilson 2010), take responsibility for the game's manufacturing and manage marketing (Simon 2012) and market research activities (Smith 2015). Most larger publishing companies also integrate distribution capabilities (Kerr 2006, Zackariasson and Wilson 2010, Simon 2012). Furthermore, project managers and producers are often dispatched by the publisher to mitigate development risks and monitor the process (Simon 2012).

#### 2.4.3. Console Manufacturers

This category includes console producers such as Sony, Microsoft and Nintendo. Typically, they do not only act as hardware producers, but also as monopolist manufacturers for boxed games running on their consoles and have some in-house game development capacities (Thomes 2015). Furthermore, they often control and restrict access to their platform and charge a fee for video games sold for their platform (van Lent 2008).

#### 2.4.4. Others

Besides the aforementioned major roles, the industry features further roles, actors and elements specialised on specific aspects such as middleware (e.g. Frostbyte Engine by Digital Illusions CE; Unreal Engine 4 by Epic Games), crowdfunding (e.g. Kickstarter.com; Indiegogo; fig.co) or equity-based crowdfunding (Parmentier and Mangematin 2009, Simon 2012, Smith 2015).

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<sup>3</sup> A patch is usually developed to correct errors and issues within the game or to introduce new features. They are distributed digitally.



## 2.5. Business Models in the Video Game Industry

The video game industry is often considered as hit-driven and dependent on extremely expensive and highly successful games (e.g. Parmentier and Mangematin 2009, Le Diberder 2012), also referred to as triple-A titles (Aoyama and Izushi 2003) or blockbusters (Cox 2014). Due to the high up-front costs that publishers face, the business model is “becoming increasingly geared towards achieving the goal of high volumes” (Cox 2014, p. 190). The business model is based on superstar games (Rosen 1981, Hupsel Vaz *et al.* 2013) and aims at managing risk by funding several potentially financially unsuccessful games through a few titles selling extremely well (Le Diberder 2012).

However, the business model has been criticised for limiting creativity (Roch 2004, Tschang 2007) and was even described as failing (Le Diberder 2012). While entry barriers to video game development were considered relatively low until the early 1990s (Le Diberder 2012), allowing even engaged individuals to create the first video games such as *Tennis for Two* or *Spacewar!* (Sihvonen 2011), the production process became much more complex in the past twenty (20) years due to rapidly increasing computing power (van Lent 2008). Consequentially, the increasing team sizes and salaries necessary to develop triple-A titles led to an explosion of costs and drove the games’ prices up (van Lent 2008, Le Diberder 2012). Le Diberder (2012) concretises that the amount of necessary man-months to develop triple-A titles rose from 60 to 400 man-months between 1990 and 2000. Besides increasing technical complexity, the budgets of triple-A video games are also growing as a consequence of surging marketing costs (Takahashi 2009). Due to these factors, Le Diberder (2012, p. 136) argues that the dominating business model can be seen as a “colosse en peril”, a “failing giant”.

The video game industry reflects this focus through its former dominant revenue model: While fixed pricing was the conventional model for a long period, its decline may be near as customers are becoming accustomed to other models (Zackariasson and Wilson 2010). In fact, Zackariasson and Wilson (2010) identified the introduction of massive multiplayer online games (MMOs) as a paradigm shift, introducing the subscription-based revenue model that allowed companies to charge players on a regular basis. The freemium model, where consumers do not pay for the game itself, but for extra features, multiplayer and customisation, can be seen as yet another massive change in the industry (Jacobs 2015) - for mobile games and apps, the freemium model already accounts for an overwhelming majority of the revenue (Schick 2014).

Table 2: Overview of revenue models



| Revenue Model        | Description                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Examples                                                                | Authors                                                       |
|----------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Fixed</b>         | Games are sold at a fixed price, allowing the consumer unlimited play after a one-time payment. Prices range from less than US\$1 over full-priced boxes traditionally costing US\$45-60 to expensive retail collectors' editions.                                                                                            | <i>The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim; The Witcher 3</i>                       | Zackariasson and Wilson 2010, Marchand and Hennig-Thurau 2013 |
| <b>Subscription</b>  | Games that are played fully online can require a periodic payment in order to allow gamers to continue playing the game. This requires developers to continuously update and adapt to gamers' demands in order to create retention.                                                                                           | <i>World of Warcraft, Ultima Online</i>                                 | Zackariasson and Wilson 2010, Marchand and Hennig-Thurau 2013 |
| <b>Hybrid</b>        | Some games charge a fixed price for offline play and a subscription fee to use its online features.                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | <i>Star Wars: The Old Republic, FIFA 2016</i>                           | Marchand and Hennig-Thurau 2013;                              |
| <b>Freemium</b>      | The game is free-to-play to create a broad user base, but players have to pay a premium for certain in-game features that may unlock more of the game or allow the player to skip ahead. While it is possible to play the game for free, the developers aim for a high conversion rate – share of users that pay the premium. | <i>Guild Wars 2, FarmVille, Hearthstone</i>                             | Marchand and Hennig-Thurau 2013, Jacobs 2015, Scholz 2015     |
| <b>Digital Goods</b> | In addition to other revenue models, games may feature in-game sales, including purely aesthetic content, but also content allowing players to progress faster in the game or making their in-game characters more powerful.                                                                                                  | <i>Counter Strike: Global Offensive; World of Warcraft; Second Life</i> | van Lent 2008, Marchand and Hennig-Thurau 2013                |

Besides its high dependency on single titles, the industry is shaped by its two-sidedness, featuring the game platform as well as the game itself (Marchand and Hennig-Thurau 2013). Consumers have to decide for a platform first, which consequently affects which games are available to them (Gretz 2010). Conversely, the range of video games available affects the platform choice, as there are many titles that appear platform-exclusive (Gretz 2010, Marchand and Hennig-Thurau 2013). And finally, the number of consumers using one platform can influence its attractiveness to developers (Gretz 2010). Due to the dependency on technical platforms and their progress, the market can also be described as cyclical (Marchand and Hennig-Thurau 2013).



## 2.6. Video Game Production Process & Lifecycle

To provide an overview of the production process and the lifecycle of video games, a model is proposed that allows insight into the modus operandi of the industry. The traditional video game production process consists of the following phases:

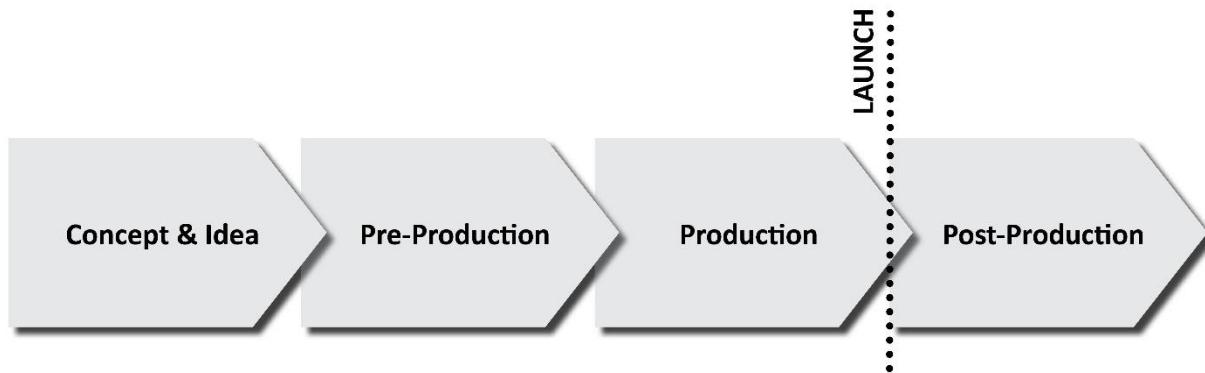


Figure 3: The Industry's Production Process Model

(1) Concept Development: This step starts the moment the idea for a game is thought of, what it is all about, its story and setting (Bates 2005). Furthermore, in this phase it is decided what audience will be targeted, what position the game is aiming at in the market and how it is different from competitors' games (Bates 2005).

(2) Pre-Production: The pre-production phase consists of creating most of the relevant guides and supporting documents needed to develop the game (e.g. Game Design Document, Technical Documents, Project Plan) as well as a first working prototype to prove the feasibility of the concept (Bates 2005). Based on the pre-production's results, publishers may decide to either continue or terminate the project (Bates 2005).

(3) Production & Development: This phase is the longest part of video game production and can take up to two years (Bates 2005). As a first step, demonstration (demo) versions of the game need to be developed for trade shows, then internal testing begins. Typically, two milestone versions are created during development: first an alpha version that marks the transition from "building to finishing" (Bates 2005, p. 214) the game, and second, the beta version, which is often used for limited public testing (Kerr 2006).

(4) Launch: After completing all tests successfully, a video game goes gold, which means sending the gold master as final version of the game to manufacturers for mass production (Bates 2005). The game is then packaged, sent out to retailers and prepared for online and offline distribution on launch day.



(5) Post-Production: After the game has been launched, a different process to drive sales, serve customers and extend the life of the game continues. This process includes maintenance of the game by releasing updates of the game to fix any bugs missed in the testing phase but discovered by the players (Bates 2005). Another part of the business model is to release upgrades, expansion packs or add-ons for the game. When distributed digitally, they are often referred to as downloadable content (DLC) (Marchand and Hennig-Thurau 2013). These upgrades extend the playtime by introducing new features or adding additional content to the game, thus stretching its lifecycle (Marchand and Hennig-Thurau 2013).

## 2.7.Trends and Future Developments

The video game industry is constantly growing and evolving, as they reach more consumers looking for new content. Five (5) trends that have the potential to influence gaming in a major way are elaborated in the following.

### 2.7.1. Digitalisation

Similar to the music and movie entertainment industries, the video game industry is facing massive changes due to digitalisation (Broekhuizen *et al.* 2013). A decade ago, video games were almost completely sold through retailers, including both specialised shops such as Gamestop as well as electronics chains and general retailers (van Lent 2008, Wuts *et al.* 2012). However, digital distribution dominates sales nowadays and is expected to grow further (Newzoo 2015, Statista 2015). Several publishers and developers introduced their own software platforms allowing customers to purchase and manage their games digitally (van Lent 2008). Due to this development, traditional retailers are cut out and the profits realised through games shift towards publishers and developers (van Lent 2008), enabling developers to distribute their video games independently, also referred to as “artist-led distribution” (e.g. Broekhuizen *et al.* 2013).

### 2.7.2. Service and Update Transformation

The industry can be seen in transformation towards digitally distributed goods (Lane 2012, Wuts *et al.* 2012, Newzoo 2016c), facilitating companies to provide further services, goods or offers based on the initial product (Lane 2012). Along with this transformation, companies also aim to concentrate on fewer titles or franchises, and therefore brands, that can be seen as services (c.f. Electronic Arts 2013a, Activision Blizzard 2016)



However, the service transformation also led to some conflicts: While consumers regard (boxed) video games as goods that they purchase and own, video games are often constructed as a service that requires gamers to accept an End-User Licence Agreement (EULA) (Lane 2012). Accordingly, even though consumers might experience the feeling that they own a game, they more often than not legally only have the licence to use the game, sometimes as a service provided by the developer or publisher (Lane 2012). In fact, video games are considered service-based brands (Lane 2012, Burgess and Spinks 2014). Along with the transformation of games towards service, the console hardware update cycle is also changing:

Traditionally having an average lifespan of seven (7) years, the business model of consoles is changing: Both Microsoft and Sony are currently working on upgrades to their respective consoles, first released in 2013 (Stuart 2016). These are not complete overhauls, but correspond to Apple's 'tick-tock' cycle, where the 'tick' refers to full release (e.g. PlayStation 4, iPhone 6) followed by a mid-life upgrade as the 'tock' (e.g. PlayStation '4.5', iPhone 6s) (Gibbs 2015, Stuart 2016).

#### 2.7.3. Virtual Reality

Virtual Reality (VR), putting on a helmet that displays a virtual 3D world, fully immersing the wearer who can interact and believe in what she is seeing (O'Boyle 2016) is the main trend in the video game industry in 2016. Moreover, it can be seen as potentially disruptive to the way we play video games (O'Boyle 2016). Sony, HTC, Samsung and Facebook are all releasing VR helmets this year and, according to several experts, the technology could reach the mainstream audience in 2016 or 2017 (Martens 2015, Järvinen 2016). As VR is not solely used for video gaming but also for education, communication and marketing (Dring 2016), it could blur the line between the industries.

#### 2.7.4. Cloud Gaming

Cloud gaming as explained by Hoffman (2013) is playing a game not by using a platform or hardware you own, such as a smartphone, PC or gaming console, but through an internet connection to online servers. This server then processes the input of your controls and subsequently streams the video of the game to your screen (Hoffman 2013). Therefore, it is similar to watching a YouTube video, as the video quality changes depending on your internet connection, except that it is completely interactive (Hoffman 2013).

In practice, it means that gamers are no longer confined to their usual platforms to play games, but can play anywhere there is a screen and a sufficiently fast internet connection. Sony Leander & Weber: The Engaged Gamer | 15



already uses this functionality on their PlayStation 4, where players can stream games to their computer, PS Vita or Sony smartphone using the cloud and home console (SONY 2016). This may represent the future of gaming and end the previous pricing models and hardware oligopolies. Sony has announced they may not release a PlayStation 5, indicating a shift towards cloud gaming (Kennedy 2016). Järvinen (2016) states that other than being a vehicle for distribution and playing games, streaming from the cloud also facilitates games purely for the enjoyment of watching and, therefore, supports the continuing rise of eSports (Newzoo 2016b).

#### 2.7.5. eSports

Esports can be explained as “competitive video gaming as a spectator sport” (sparks & honey 2015). Much like traditional spectator sports such as football, the audience watches professional players either on a screen or at large stadiums. In 2015, the global eSport market reached 188 million viewers and was worth US\$747.5M; it is expected to reach US\$1.9B by 2018 (Superdata 2016). Even more conservative projections expect a CAGR of 40.7% until 2019 (Newzoo 2016b). Drawing over 35 million viewers, the World Championship (Worlds) of the game League of Legends, was the largest event in eSports of 2015 (Kresse, 2015). That is more viewers than most major US sports events (BBC 2016). In 2016 almost all eSport events are still available to watch for free on streaming sites such as YouTube or Twitch, however, similar to major league football games, important eSport matches may fall behind a paywall (Stuart and Webber 2015), adding additional revenue streams to the industry. In 2016 the foundation of The World eSports Association (WESA) was announced as an governing body created with the intention to regulate the eSports scene, similar to FIFA in football (Campbell 2016).

### 2.8. Key Industry Challenges

#### 2.8.1. Piracy

According to industry information (Holm 2014), the video game business has been heavily affected by piracy<sup>4</sup>. It is estimated to account for US\$74bn of lost revenues, stemming from games being downloaded 2.5 billion times illegally (Graham 2016). This has led the industry to develop sophisticated protective measures for their products, including serial numbers with a limited number of activations, online activation and digital rights management (DRM) (Holm

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<sup>4</sup> Downloads of games without legal purchase, making the download illegal.



2014). DRM usually requires gamers to constantly be connected to company servers on the internet to continue playing (Holm 2014, Behm *et al.* 2016).

Especially the always-online requirements have been heavily criticised and contested by gamers who regard these measures as limitations and privacy violations (Lane 2012). Furthermore, a highly efficacious cracking<sup>5</sup> scene has evolved, that often cracks video games within a few hours after release (Holm 2014, Parkin 2016). However, due to advancing encryption techniques, some argue that the end of video game piracy is foreseeable (Depoorter 2014, Graham 2016, Parkin 2016)

#### 2.8.2. Consumer Rights and Legal Issues

However, the introduction of always-online requirements because of DRM and counterpiracy measures are experienced and can be regarded as a curtailments of rights (Holm 2014, Behm *et al.* 2016). Since DRM often only affects rightful customers, it creates additional tensions between customers and companies (Lane 2012, Holm 2014). Gamers may feel powerless when confronted with DRM, leading them to deliberately choosing pirated games over legal copies, creating a belligerent situation in consumer-company relations (Holm 2014).

The aforementioned rapidly growing freemium pricing model contains some legal issues that need to be taken into consideration, such as the question if they are actually free if you can spend real money within them, or the question if companies are trying to exhort children to spend real money (European Commission 2014). This has led to both smartphone giants Apple and Google not labelling these kinds of games available from their stores as ‘free’ anymore (Bolluyt 2014). It has also led to increased importance of clarity on the rights and value of in-game money and the responsibility of payment, if for example a minor purchases new features within the freemium model (TaylorWessing 2013).

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<sup>5</sup> Bypassing or disabling illegally copyright protection measures.



### 3. Literature Review

*Following the aim of this study to investigate the relationship between engaged gamers, strategic brand management and industry logic within the video game industry, this section provides an overview of relevant theories from the according fields. This includes (1) strategic brand management and (2) engagement theory within marketing literature as well as (3) game studies.*

#### 3.1. Strategic Brand Management

This paper is centred on the phenomenon of the engaged gamer and how it affects the strategic brand management within the video game industry. Aaker (2010) explains strategic brand management as creating brand awareness strategically, as opposed to generally, thus referring to the idea of getting recognised for the right reasons. Kapferer (2012) argues that building a sustainable advantage over the competition is the goal of strategy and one of the ways of doing this is through branding. He further emphasises that the business model constitutes an important part of strategic brand management and should be integrated (Kapferer 2012).

Kapferer (2012) argued that paying too much attention to the added value or halo effect is fallacious, as social media can breach the halo effect. Therefore, he criticises the focus on communication as paramount factor of currently existing approaches of brand management. Roper and Fill (2012), however, focus on the importance of brand reputation management and communication, as a company can manage a strong brand, but still have a poor reputation, (Kapferer 2012, p. 158). Identity, communication, reputation and positioning as four important dimensions of strategic brand management are reviewed next.

##### 3.1.1. Identity

Keller (2013) argues that realising the right brand identity is to create brand salience, the when and why the brand is recognised by consumers, and represents the bottom of his brand resonance pyramid. He further elucidates that “[...] creating the right meaning in terms of brand performance and brand imagery associations” (Keller 2013, p. 133) will make the targeted customer believe the brand is pertinent to them.

The identity comes from inside the organisation and must be communicated both internally, as only a clearly defined internal identity allows to utilise brands as strategic platform (Urde 1999), and to external target groups to be efficient (Roper and Fill 2012). Brand identity is Leander & Weber: The Engaged Gamer | 18



consequently required to establish the positioning of the brand and is consequently a first step in creating a favourable reputation (Keller 2013). Furthermore, according to Chernatony (2010), brand identity encourages strategic brand management. It is important as “engaging brands must not be hollow, but have a deep inner inspiration. They [...] must have character, their own beliefs, and help consumers in their life, and also in discovering their own identity” (Kapferer 2012, p. 158). Urde and Greyser (2015b), referring to corporate brands, further highlight that identity is at the core of the brand and connects the brand through communication to reputation.

According to Kapferer (2012), the identity of a brand can be defined by six (6) different facets: *physique*, *personality*, *relationships*, *culture*, *reflection* and *self-image*. These elements communicate the identity of a brand between the company and consumer.

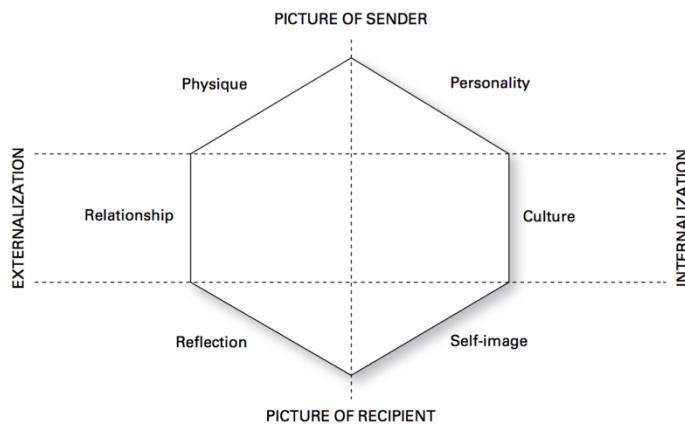


Figure 4 - The Brand Identity Prism (Kapferer, 2012 p.158)

Kapferer (2012, p. 158) understands the *physique* as “both the brand’s backbone and its tangible added value” that need to be established to develop a brand. It represents the physical features that consumers think of in relation with the brand. *Personality* is the character of the brand, built over time by communicating to consumers in a way that represents human personality traits. Together, *physique* and *personality* make up the constructed picture of the brand’s sender which can be perceived and described by consumers as a person.

*Culture* refers to the basic principles and values that all products and communication within the company are based upon. It transports an ideology and, thus, meaningfulness to its customers, allowing them to unite around a brand’s idea or message. It is regarded as the most important facet of the brand prism (Kapferer 2012). The group of people that best can identify with the ideology of the brand, who are already supporters of the ideology, can be made into brand crusaders (Kapferer 2012). They engage with the brand even though they are not



necessarily consumers (Kapferer 2012). The brand can also symbolise a *relationship* between people. *Culture* and *relationship* together represents the picture of the receiver, the stereotypical consumer.

*Reflection* is a group or person chosen to represent the users of the brand, identifiable but not necessarily an image of the actual users. *Self-image* is how the targeted consumer thinks others will perceive them because of using the brand. The closer the identity of the brand is to the consumer's *self-image*, the more favourable the brand's reputation will be (Roper and Fill 2012). The three traits on the left are social and visible, that creates the brand's outward expression. On the other hand, the three on the right are built in to the brand, in its spirit.

### 3.1.2. Communication

An organisation's communication includes all of their visuals, advertising, logo and Internet site, as well as public relations and financial reports (Kapferer 2012). Communication is used by any organisation mainly to influence the way its stakeholders perceive said organisation, largely by managing the identity communication of the brand (Roper and Fill 2012). In strategic brand management, the creation of perceived value starts with the product or service, and as Kapferer (2012, p. 8) explains, the role of communication "is [...] to structure, to orient tangible perceptions and to add intangible ones" to said service or product. Through communication a company or brand can affect its reputation in the external marketplace (Davies and Chun 2002, Roper and Fill 2012, Urde and Greyser 2015b). Hence, the aim of communication is to influence reputation, so that perceived positioning aligns with brand identity.

### 3.1.3. Reputation

Between the aim and the actual, is reputation, what the Merriam-Webster dictionary (2016) defines as the "overall quality or character as seen or judged by people in general". Roper and Fill (2012) define reputation as the general views and impressions held by stakeholders and non-stakeholders. They continue, arguing that a product's reputation is largely created by its consumers, while the reputation of an organisation or corporation is formed by the general public, not just their customers and consumers - everyone that is voicing an opinion about the brand of a company is then creating its reputation (Roper and Fill 2012). Kapferer (2012, p. 29) further explains the concept of reputation to be "the sum of all opinions among all stakeholders about the company". Reputation can create demand and make a brand attractive in the long run, it constitutes therefore a judgment from the market regarding the brand (Kapferer 2012). Consumers, specifically, may use the established reputation to mitigate risks when deciding on



purchase (Keller 2013). Brands with good reputations, therefore, are more likely to attract new consumers. Even though a positive reputation can take a long time to build, it can be hurt or ruined much quicker, by a simple misstep (Keller 2013).

This is of crucial for service brands, argue Roper and Fill (2012), as their intangible nature exacerbates consumers' judgements based on a brand's performance. Consequentially, as video games can be considered service-based brands (Burgess and Spinks 2014), the management of their reputation is of paramount importance. As the reputation of a brand is linked to its identity (Chernatony 1999, Chernatony and Larsen 2000), it needs to be considered at all stages in brand and identity building (Keller 2013).

### 3.1.4. Positioning

The point a product, service or brand has, in relation to similar offerings by competitors, in consumers' minds is its position (Armstrong and Kotler 2015). They further elaborate that "positioning is arranging for a product to occupy a clear, distinctive, and desirable place relative to competing products in the minds of target consumers" (Armstrong and Kotler 2015, p. 78). Fuchs and Diamantopoulos (2010) divide positioning into three (3) parts: intended, actual and perceived. The intended positioning, the place in the target consumers' and non-customer stakeholders' minds where the brand owners want the brand to be (Fuchs and Diamantopoulos 2010, Urde and Greyser 2015b), is closely related to the identity part of brand building. The actual positioning is what the communication succeeds in capturing, this is what the consumers and other stakeholders see and the basis, along with reputation and previous experience, on which they form their own perceptions of the brand, the perceived positioning (Fuchs and Diamantopoulos 2010). Urde and Greyser (2015a) argue that the reputational element of positioning is how stakeholders comprehend the distinct, differentiated position the brand holds in the market. Hence, the positioning is where all stakeholders position the brand in their minds, differentiated in relation to competing brands.

## 3.2.Gamers

To answer the question of who the consumers of video games are, Shaw (2010) argues that we need to look at the diversity and inclusiveness of video game culture, or rather, video games in culture, not just at those who identify themselves as gamers, separate from mainstream culture. As argued by Scharkow et al. (2015), games are no longer played exclusively by a stereotypical, homogeneous group. Other studies have described who consumers are within different genres and gamer communities, such as Williams et al. (2008) with massive



multiplayer online game (MMO) or Jansz and Tanis (2007) with first person shooters (FPS). Shaw (Shaw 2010, p. 414) argues that “Video games are played by the young and old, males and females, and across the world”. Therefore, focusing only on isolated communities of gamers yields findings that are not generalizable (Scharkow et al. 2015).

As our studies focuses on a phenomenon of what we termed ‘the engaged gamer’, gamers that engage beyond the mere purchase and playing of video games. It thus reflects Keller’s (2009, 2013) brand resonance theory, more specifically referring to its active engagement dimension that is defined as willingness to “invest time, energy money or other resources in the brand beyond those expended during purchase or consumption of the brand” (Keller 2009, 2013, p. 121). Therefore, we use an inclusive understanding of gamers, solely concentrating on the criterion of engagement and do not differentiate by demographic or other characteristics.

### 3.3. Motivations

The reasons consumers play video games are of interest, as it assists in finding why some also engage beyond playing video games (Ratliff 2015). Yee (2006) identified three (3) overarching structures of video game motivation: *Social*, *immersion* and *achievement*. One of the main motivators is the *social* aspect (e.g. Tanis and Jansz 2008, Williams et al. 2008, Przybylski et al. 2010, Shaw 2010, Scharkow et al. 2015), the building and maintaining of relationships. However, games can be played both solitary and socially, and as such with known or unknown others (Tanis and Jansz 2008, Shaw 2010). Players can interact with each other socially either by playing together in the same physical room, or within shared virtual worlds, even though they are far apart geographically (Przybylski et al. 2010). Video game developers address increasingly the *social* reason why players play, by creating relationships between players using chat rooms or forums (Przybylski et al. 2010).

Several authors also mention *immersion* (Williams et al. 2008, Przybylski et al. 2010, Shaw 2010) as a reason to play. That is the experience of feeling present in the digital world, creating the illusion of actually being there (Przybylski et al. 2010) and is closely connected to the experience of flow, referring to the experience of being completely absorbed (Csikszentmihalyi 1991). Yee (2006) further divides *immersion* into subcategories including escapism, or escaping daily life to that of the video game. This is similar to what Sherry and Lucas (2003) call diversion, playing to avoid responsibilities in real life. The third motivation mentioned is that of *achievement*, including gaining status or power through advancement and competition (Yee, 2006). Similarly, Tanis and Jansz (2008) and Sherry and Lucas (2003) mention competition, to



become better at the game than others, and challenge, to try to gain skill to beat difficult games, as motivators.

Table 3: Motivational dimensions in gaming

| Motivation  | Explanation                                                                                                                                                                                 | Authors                                                                                                                                           |
|-------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Social      | Forming and maintaining relationships through communication, interaction and playing together as teams.                                                                                     | Yee 2006, Tanis and Jansz 2008, Williams <i>et al.</i> 2008, Przybylski <i>et al.</i> 2010, Shaw 2010, Scharkow <i>et al.</i> 2015, Marchand 2016 |
| Immersion   | Exploration of the game's environment. Full involvement, curiosity in the game, creating an experience of presence within the game. Another side is diversion – playing to avoid real life. | Csikszentmihalyi 1991, Sherry and Lucas 2003, Yee 2006, Williams <i>et al.</i> 2008, Przybylski <i>et al.</i> 2010, Shaw 2010                     |
| Achievement | To gain status and skill through competition, challenges and advancement                                                                                                                    | Sherry and Lucas 2003, Yee 2006, Tanis and Jansz 2008                                                                                             |

### 3.4. Engagement

In regard to video games, one can differentiate between the engagement and motivations gamers base their behaviour on while playing the game, as opposed to forms of engagement that occur beyond purchase and consumption. Engagement as a concept has been widely used in several academic disciplines, including psychology, sociology and organisational behaviour (Brodie *et al.* 2011).

In the marketing discipline, however, the concept of engagement only received growing interest throughout the last decade, mostly referring to it as consumer or customer engagement (CE). As pointed out by several researchers (Bowden 2009, Brodie *et al.* 2011, Burgess and Spinks 2014), academic interest in CE has sharply risen since 2005. This trend was reflected by the Marketing Science Institute (2014) through its call for engagement conceptualisations, constituting one of its tier one (1) research priorities for 2014-2016. In contrast to prior concepts, including involvement, consumer engagement is characterised by interactions that consumers show in relation to a focal object (e.g. a brand, product, company) (Hollebeek *et al.* 2014). For further differentiation, Hollebeek (2011a) provides a detailed overview of how the consumer brand engagement concept relates to other marketing constructs.

Despite the growing interest, the academic study of the engagement concept can still be regarded in its infancy (Jaakkola and Alexander 2014), lacking a generally accepted conceptualisation (Burgess and Spinks 2014). Prior research focused on different aspects of engagement, including engagement processes (Bowden 2009, Graffigna and Gambetti 2015), consumer engagement in brand communities (Brodie *et al.* 2013) and consumer brand



engagement (Gambetti and Graffigna 2010, Hollebeek 2011b, 2011a, Gambetti *et al.* 2012, Graffigna and Gambetti 2015). Furthermore, different conceptualisations of CE dimensionality were introduced, most of them agreeing on a behavioural, cognitive and emotional dimension (Brodie *et al.* 2013, Hollebeek and Chen 2014, Graffigna and Gambetti 2015, Dessart *et al.* 2016, Hollebeek *et al.* 2016), whereas other authors specifically delineated an additional social dimension (Calder *et al.* 2009, Vivek *et al.* 2012).

While engagement is often regarded as a “state of mind” and used to investigate the willingness of either consumers or customers to invest resources in a focal object (c.f. Hollebeek 2011a, Hollebeek *et al.* 2016), the actual forms of engagement behaviour and their consequences are often overlooked. Jaakkola and Alexander (2014) presented one of the few studies highlighting the behavioural element of consumer engagement and linking it to consequences on value co-creation. They proposed four (4) types of consumer engagement behaviours: augmenting behaviours, co-developing behaviours, influencing behaviours and mobilising behaviours.

Similar to Jaakkola and Alexander (2014), Keller (2009, 2013) focused on the behavioural aspect of engagement, referring to it as *active engagement*. Keller (2013, p. 121) argued that it represents the “strongest affirmation of brand loyalty”, expressed by consumers through the investment of financial resources, time or energy. It is defined as consumer activity beyond purchase and consumption, thus emphasising the behavioural aspect of engagement (Burgess and Spinks 2014). Active engagement is furthermore seen as one of the four (4) factors determining brand resonance and constitutes the highest element of Keller’s (Keller 2009, 2013) brand resonance pyramid for brand building.



## 4. Methodology

*In the methodology chapter the different research methods used in this thesis are described and the approach used is argued for. After explaining philosophy and research strategy used, data collection methods are presented. Finally, the analysis style is presented along with limitations and ethical considerations.*

### 4.1. Research Design

Our study investigates the phenomenon of the engaged gamer and the effects engagement behaviours have on the strategic brand management within the video game industry, defined in our research questions:

- (1) *Why and how do gamers engage with brands beyond purchase and consumption within the video game industry?*
- (2) *How does this engagement beyond purchase and consumption affect the strategic brand management in the video game industry?*

To develop a deeper understanding, two objects of study are relevant for this research, (1) behaviours of engagement and (2) the motivations engaged gamers have for their activity. Furthermore, as we aim at elucidating the effects their behaviours have on the industry's strategic brand management as third (3) object of study. We approached these through an abductive research approach, based on a multi-method strategy, consisting of a participant micro-ethnography and in-depth interviews as a first phase, and two case studies investigating the consequences of gamers' engagement through a secondary data analysis in the second phase of the study.

The research design is divided into two empirical parts: The first part aims at answering the first RQ by identifying different types of engagement and at uncovering what motivates gamers. Consequentially, our paper's point of departure focuses on studying consumers' expression of engagement. The second part of our paper shifts focus from consumer behaviour to the effects and consequences gamers' engagement have on video game brands and their management.

#### 4.1.1. Qualitative Data

Based on our study's aim of understanding the phenomenon of the engaged gamer and how it affects the strategic brand management in the industry, we "seek to understand and interpret more local meanings" (Braun and Clarke 2013, p. 4), namely, the meaning of engagement for the video game industry. Accordingly, gamers' engagement behaviours need to be seen in their specific context. Following Braun and Clarke's (2013, p. 20) argument that "qualitative



research is about meaning, not numbers”, concurring with other authors pointing out that researching meanings is primarily linked to qualitative research (e.g. Bryman and Bell 2011, Easterby-Smith *et al.* 2012), this study focuses on qualitative data.

#### 4.1.2. Abductive Research Approach

Based on the pragmatist philosopher Peirce, we understand our research as employing an abductive logic (Peirce 1958, Given 2008), a logic that also can be argued to be the “ground state of cognition” (Shank 2008, p. 855). McMullin, p. 143 (2013) even argued that abduction leads to “the inference that makes science”. One central function of abductive research can be seen in its ability to provide surprising explanations (Shank 2008, Timmermans and Tavory 2012), rooted in its ability to combine deductive and inductive approaches in one study (Saunders *et al.* 2009). Furthermore, abduction prompts researchers to “enter the field with the deepest and broadest theoretical base possible” (Timmermans and Tavory 2012, p. 180), allowing us to further develop the theoretical knowledge throughout the study and using this improved repertoire to gain new insights.

Peirce argued that “Abduction seeks a theory. Induction seeks for facts” Peirce 1958, pp. 217–218. Consequently, Timmermans and Tavory (2012) describe the process of abduction as providing explanations first, which are subsequently formalised into deductions and corroborated through empirical insights generated by induction. Therefore, the departure point of our study was the identification of the research gap within the strategic brand management literature, namely the phenomenon of the engaged gamer and its consequences. First insights from the ethnography in Copenhagen revealed the existence of engaged gamers as defined in this paper, and their potential influence on the strategic brand management in the video game industry. Consequently, in a second step, a continued ethnography provided further explanations of their behaviours, before these behaviours were tested throughout two case studies, generating further theory of how engaged gamers influence brands. Therefore, it constitutes a creative process and has to be understood as such (Fylkesnes 2006), iterating between deduction and induction (Timmermans and Tavory 2012).

### 4.2. Research Strategies

#### 4.2.1. Ethnography

A multi-sited micro-ethnographic approach (Wolcott 1990, Bryman and Bell 2015) was chosen for the first study phase to develop a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, allowing



us to “immerse” in settings in which gamers’ engagement occurs (Easterby-Smith *et al.* 2012, p. 51) and to gain an insight perspective of the engaged gamers (Bryman and Bell 2015). An ethnographic approach was suitable due to its ability to generate relevant primary data contextualising engagement behaviours, but also because it incorporates a direct dimension, as it involves an actual encounter of researched and researcher (Knoblauch 2014). Consequently, our multi-sited micro-ethnography also allowed to shape research and results through their behaviour. According to Prasad *et al.*, p. 707 (2011), multi-sited ethnography allows researchers to follow “specific social phenomena as they travel between different actors and networks”. Since the phenomenon of engaged gamers is global and not confined by locations, we decided to attend three different research locations:

For a first pilot study, the Copenhagen Games event was selected, as it combined eSports tournaments with other forms of activities. Subsequently, we followed the phenomenon to a video game club in Southern Sweden and the DreamHack Masters event in Malmö, enabling us to see it in its specific contexts (Saunders *et al.* 2009). All locations were chosen due to their characteristic of offering video game related activities beyond purchase and consumption, thus indicating a potential presence of engaged gamers. As pointed out by Bryman and Bell (2015), this trailing of the phenomenon allowed us to connect gamers’ individual and local practices with “wider social events and mindsets” (Prasad *et al.* 2011, p. 707).

A further advantage of the selected locations were their comparably low access barriers, as both the Copenhagen Games and the DreamHack Masters Malmö were publicly accessible. The video game club was also open to interested people, rendering the micro-ethnography feasible. Our role was ranging from a participant-as-observer role during the Copenhagen Games and the DreamHack Masters in Malmö to an observer-as-participant role during the study at the video game club (Bryman and Bell 2015). It was furthermore defined by active impression management (Hammersley and Atkinson 2010), trying to convey confidentiality through demeanour, facilitated by our own background – we both grew up with video games, allowing us to appear trustworthy and knowledgeable at the same time. Our identity as researchers was overtly communicated for the research at the video game club, whereas during the two other events the role was only communicated when addressing people directly for field interviews.

#### 4.2.2. Qualitative Instrumental Case Studies

In the second phase of our study, two (2) qualitative instrumental case studies were conducted to research how the previously identified engagement behaviours affect the strategic



brand management. They also served to further deepen our knowledge about gamers' engagement, linking back to our interest in the 'how' and 'why' of gamers' engagement. Employing a case study research also reflects our abductive research approach, as it represents the "best epistemological agent" (Fylkesnes 2006, p. 186) and the theory generated through case studies is often based on abductive, not inductive reasoning (Thomas 2010).

To investigate the phenomenon, we therefore needed to answer questions concerned with the 'how' and 'why', that according to Yin (2003) correspond to a case study approach. Moreover, he points out that a multiple-case approach is preferable for exploratory purposes (Yin 2003). As the chosen cases are designed to support our research of the engaged gamer and illustrate the phenomenon in more detail, they can be regarded as instrumental cases (Stake 2009). Similar to the ethnographic approach (Hammersley and Atkinson 2010), case studies enable researchers to achieve an in-depth understanding and provide contextual information (Cavaye 1996, Yin 2003). Both cases studied were based on online secondary data, more specifically textual artefacts in online forums and online articles describing the events, outcomes and previous research (Bryman and Bell 2015). They furthermore included the previously defined types of engagement as criterion for the emerging theory (Eisenhardt 1989), therefore allowing us to create a better understanding of the phenomenon of the engaged gamer.

The first case study focused on the release of *SimCity*, the fifth sequel of the SimCity video game series. While the first game of the series was released in 1991, its newest iteration in 2013 can be regarded as a contemporary phenomenon (Yin 2003) and, thus, eligible for our research. Furthermore, considering the more than two (2) million sold copies (Cutler 2013) and a very active community (Simtropolis 2016), choosing *SimCity* as unit of research (Bryman and Bell 2015) ensured that the data collected displayed a certain level of variation.

The second case investigated the re-rating of *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*, a successful single player role play game (RPG), by the American Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB). Analogous to *SimCity*, it constitutes a recent and, therefore, contemporary phenomenon (Yin 2003, Stake 2009). Furthermore, it is a triple-A title and enjoyed lifetime sales of more than four (4) million units (Brightman 2011), providing a strong player base and the potential to find textual artefacts from engaged gamers.

However, the case study approach is target of ongoing critique, especially focusing on the inability of case study research to generate theory and the limited generalisability of insights from case studies (MacIntyre 2003, Saunders *et al.* 2009, Easterby-Smith *et al.* 2012, Bryman



and Bell 2015). The critique, however, is mostly based on the understanding that generalisations in social sciences are applicable in the same way generalisations in natural sciences are – instead, generalisations derived from social studies need to be “unpretentious in their assumptions of fallibility and provisionality” (Thomas 2010, pp. 576–577).

“Because of the absence of ‘hard theory’”, Flyvbjerg (2006, p. 224) argued, the focus of research should be rather on learning. And case studies provide an excellent approach for learning (Flyvbjerg 2006), as “more discoveries have arisen from intense observation of very limited material than from statistics applied to large groups” (Beveridge 1950, p. 101). Accordingly, the *SimCity* and *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* cases are also selected due their learning potential, as we were expecting to find engaged gamers due to previous knowledge.

#### 4.3. Data Collection Methods

Table 4: Overview of Data Sources

| DATA SOURCE           | DESCRIPTION                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|-----------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Interviews</b>     | A total of nineteen (19) interviewees were consulted in fourteen (14) interview sessions. Three (3) interviews were held with two interviewees, one (1) with three interviewees.                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| <b>Ethnography</b>    | Participant observation at two events ( <i>Copenhagen Games 2016</i> , <i>DreamHack Masters Malmö 2016</i> ) and participant observation at a video game club in southern Sweden. Field notes and photographs were taken.                                                                                                                                                                         |
| <b>Secondary Data</b> | A total of 1.418 comments from one forum, several virtual documents, visual documents and relevant articles were analysed for the <i>SimCity</i> case.<br>A total of 148 posts from one forum and one comment section for an interview with the creator of focal modification were investigated, along with several virtual documents and relevant articles for The Elder Scrolls: Oblivion case. |

##### 4.3.1. In-depth Interviews

For our research, a deep understanding of the phenomenon through the collection of further in-depth data was imperative. Therefore, we complemented the micro-ethnography through additional interviews to generate primary data, as no suitable secondary data existed. Combining observational data and interviews provided the possibility to improve our own understanding and interpretation of the interviews (Dexter 1970), and vice versa (Hammersley and Atkinson 2010). Except for one interview, all interviews constituted face-to-face semi-structured interviews (Saunders *et al.* 2009, Braun and Clarke 2013, Bryman and Bell 2015).

Throughout the multi-sited micro-ethnography, a total of fifteen (15) interviews with nineteen (19) interviewees were conducted. Due to the ethnographic approach, their settings varied largely: The four semi-structured interviews conducted at the video game club and the



interview at Lund University were formally set up, requiring an active impression management to create rapport (Hammersley and Atkinson 2010). To mitigate the potential hesitation due to the formal setting, both researchers were present. This, as argued by Bryman and Bell (2015), supports in creating a more colloquial atmosphere, increasing the chance that the interviewees respond in truthful way. Furthermore, they constituted in-depth interviews, as our questions aimed for a deeper understanding of their behaviours and at uncovering their underlying motivations.

Similarly, the two interviews conducted at the Copenhagen Games with the responsible public relations manager and a volunteering worker constituted in-depth interviews. The former was set up comparably to the aforementioned interviews, whereas the latter occurred spontaneously during the event. Further spontaneous interviews were held at the DreamHack Masters Malmö: For all of these interviews, both researchers were present to create an informal atmosphere (Bryman and Bell 2015). A final interview through skype was conducted with an interviewee in Germany, due to its time and cost saving advantages (Bryman and Bell 2015).

#### 4.3.2. Interview Sampling

Subsequent to choosing the locations for the multi-sited micro-ethnography, a purposive sampling was employed to sample for participants that can be either considered engaged gamers or industry professionals who were confronted with engaged gamers before (Bryman and Bell 2015, p. 430). Within the population of engaged gamers, we further sampled for maximum variation to assure a wide variation of possible engagement behaviours (Saunders *et al.* 2009, pp. 239–240, Bryman and Bell 2015).

As the contact to the video game club was created through an intermediary, the four interviews conducted were based on a snowball sampling (Bryman and Bell 2015, pp. 434–435). Nonetheless, all four (4) interviewees fulfilled the criteria applied for the other interviewees. Two (2) of them were also members of the club's board, while the other two (2) participants were regular members. Moreover, we interviewed twelve (12) engaged gamers during the DreamHack Masters in Malmö, at Lund University and through Skype, one (1) public relations manager and one (1) volunteer at the Copenhagen Games and one (1) independent game developer at the DreamHack Masters in Malmö.



| Name      | Age | Gender | Setup | Date       | Location                |
|-----------|-----|--------|-------|------------|-------------------------|
| Jens      | 36  | Male   | 1:1   | 26.03.2016 | Copenhagen Games        |
| Sven      | 26  | Male   | 1:1   | 26.03.2016 | Copenhagen Games        |
| Karlos    | 26  | Male   | 2:1   | 14.04.2016 | Video Game Club         |
| Man       | 35  | Male   | 2:1   | 14.04.2016 | Video Game Club         |
| John      | 34  | Male   | 2:1   | 14.04.2016 | Video Game Club         |
| Olivia    | 32  | Female | 2:1   | 14.04.2016 | Video Game Club         |
| Han       | 23  | Man    | 2:2   | 16.04.2016 | DreamHack Masters Malmö |
| Ling      | 21  | Female | 2:2   | 16.04.2016 | DreamHack Masters Malmö |
| Sven      | 27  | Male   | 2:1   | 16.04.2016 | DreamHack Masters Malmö |
| Anna      | 30  | Female | 2:1   | 17.04.2016 | DreamHack Masters Malmö |
| Bernd     | 29  | Male   | 2:1   | 17.04.2016 | DreamHack Masters Malmö |
| Freddy    | 24  | Male   | 2:1   | 17.04.2016 | DreamHack Masters Malmö |
| Non Gamer | 30  | Male   | 2:1   | 17.04.2016 | DreamHack Masters Malmö |
| Madeleine | 26  | Female | 2:3   | 17.04.2016 | DreamHack Masters Malmö |
| Elsa      | 26  | Female | 2:3   | 17.04.2016 | DreamHack Masters Malmö |
| Susan     | 25  | Female | 2:3   | 17.04.2016 | DreamHack Masters Malmö |
| Klas      | 23  | Male   | 1:1   | 26.04.2016 | Skype (Germany)         |
| Lari      | 26  | Male   | 2:2   | 26.04.2016 | Lund University         |
| Olaf      | 24  | Male   | 2:2   | 26.04.2016 | Lund University         |

Table 5: Overview of Interviewees

#### 4.3.3. Secondary Data

In the two case studies, analysis of secondary data was utilised. Because of the distance in time since the events investigated took place, no primary data was collected. In the case of *The Elder Scrolls: Oblivion* topless modification, two web forums related to the modification were chosen. The forums analysed included the website's Gamepolitics comments section to their interview with Maeyanie, the creator of the modification (McInnes 2006) and The Escapist magazine's forum (The Escapist, 2006) regarding Zenke (2007a) article *The Breasts That Broke The Game*.

These forums were chosen because they are two (2) of the most cited sources for everything written about the subject, and they both rendered extensive feedback from an engaged community. The discussions were most active in the months following the release of the game in March of 2006, but the last opinion was not voiced until 2010. In total 148 user comments were analysed and coded. For the *SimCity* case, a total of 1.418 comments in two separate threads about *SimCity* on Simtropolis.com were analysed. These chosen because of the number



of total views and participating users rendered them relevant. Despite constituting of secondary data, there was no lack of understanding of loss of context (Bryman and Bell 2015), since the focal articles and forums were still available online. Through our research of other secondary sources such as virtual documents (Bethesda Softworks LLC 2006, Rose 2012), visual documents (YouTube, 2016) and articles (Zenke 2007a, 2007b, Pitts 2013, Behm *et al.* 2016) our knowledge of the case ensured that the data interpretation was correct (Bryman and Bell 2015).

#### 4.4. Data Analysis

In a first step, the data collected through the interviews was transcribed, which can be considered a first interpretation (Braun and Clarke 2013), and subsequently coded (Braun and Clarke 2013, Bryman and Bell 2015). A first complete descriptive coding was followed by an interpretative, selective coding, based on previously read literature (Miles and Huberman 1994, Braun and Clarke 2013). The same process was applied to all field notes taken and secondary data analysed. The further analysis constituted an iterative process, moving back and forth between data collection, data reduction and data display, leading to conclusions and explanations derived from the analysis (Miles and Huberman 1994). Accordingly, it also reflected the abductive research approach, by including the reviewed literature as part of the analysis and providing explanations first (Timmermans and Tavory 2012). In between the data collection steps, we discussed our understandings of the generated data, leading to new understandings. Furthermore, we visualised the data continuously, both by using digital creative coding tools and by creating traditional mind maps, models and matrices (Miles and Huberman 1994).

This iterative “cycling among the [...] data” (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007, p. 25), necessary for theory building (Eisenhardt 1989) assured an increasing abstraction (Miles and Huberman 1994). Accordingly, from descriptive codes close to the text, we moved towards more interpretative and abstract codes (Miles and Huberman 1994), helping us to generate themes and theory to improve our understanding of the phenomenon. Nonetheless, direct statements from interviewees and users were utilised to provide illustrative insight into the actual behaviours and argumentations of engaged gamers. Furthermore, it provides increased transparency by allowing readers to track and understand the theory generation (Miles and Huberman 1994, Bryman and Bell 2015).



The analysis consists of three parts: In a first step, the ethnographic data was analysed to create an initial understanding of gamers' engagement types and motivations, before in a second step the influence of these behaviours was analysed in two case studies to highlight their potential. In the third and final step, the acquired understanding was used to further analyse and discuss engaged gamers' impact. In virtue of our abductive approach (Timmermans and Tavory 2012), the "literature is threaded throughout the analysis" (Braun and Clarke 2013, p. 257).

Finally, as several sources of data, collected through the micro-ethnography and the secondary data analysis, were included in the analysis, it can be seen as a triangulation of data (Miles and Huberman 1994). According to Eisenhardt (1989, p. 538), "multiple collection methods provide stronger substantiation of constructs", thereby concurring with Miles and Huberman's (1994) view of triangulation as corroboration. Consequently, as our results and insights from different data types were coherent, we argue that the theory and explanations generated possess an increased generalisability.

#### 4.5. Ethical Considerations

According to (Bryman and Bell 2015, p. 414), qualitative research is susceptible to a lack of transparency, with less strict guidelines than quantitative research. As this study was based solely on the qualitative data collected, it was crucial to be transparent and clear in describing how all data was gathered and analysed. The use of qualitative data analysis software (maxQDA) mitigated the lack of transparency by explicitly clarifying the codification process.

However, Bryman and Bell (2015) warns that when citing from qualitative coding, the content risks loses its context. What was actually said can be interpreted differently depending on the social setting in which it was said. Sufficient observations made, notes taken and photos recorded during the interviews ensures transparency.

Another issue that arises when analysing qualitative data collected is that it contains detailed demographic information in specific contexts, consequentially making it problematic to disguise the actual identities behind the data (Bryman and Bell 2015). As described in previous section the primary data collection was done in multiple locations. The geographic sites have either been omitted or judged to be large enough to sufficiently preclude the participants' identities. When conducting the interviews, the subjects were first inquired if they accepted being recorded to be used in this research, thereby ensuring informed consent (Easterby-Smith *et al.* 2012). However, no real names are used in this study, to further conceal the participants' actual character.



The secondary data collected poses the same ethical consideration in protecting the identity of the sender as primary. Additionally, the forums analysed for the second phase of this study was done so with no consent obtained from the users posting, posing a separate ethical issue (Bryman and Bell 2015). According to Kozinets (2011) the Internet emerged with the intention that information should be free. Although, Online forums are not agreed to be either fully public or private, and the ethics on how to approach them are unique to the Internet (Kozinets 2002, 2011). In doing research of online forums, such as what Kozinets (2002, 2011) terms netnography, the researcher is an active participant or an observer of interactions.

However, in this study we analysed messages posted between 2006 and 2013 then stored online and as such they do not constitute human subjects social study (Kozinets 2011). Seeking permission from these users was decided to be futile, but we agree with Hair and Clark (2007) that care should be considered when deciding what quotes to use. Furthermore, we decided to use the original nicknames chosen by the participants in the online forums, as supported by Herring (1996) arguing that one should merely use the handle that accompanies the original writing, because if the authors are happy for the Internet to associate their words with their names, they should not object for it to appear in print. We moreover agree with Hair and Clark (2007), arguing that trying to hide the identity of members of public forums can never be successful considering the sophistication of Google and other search engines enabling word for word search of quotes taken.



## 5. Engaged Gamers' Behaviours and Motivations

*This chapter analyses the empirical data collected through the micro-ethnography to present the different types of gamers' engagement behaviours and their underlying motivations. To further pursue the aim of our study, we introduce a conceptual model based on the literature review and industry background that allows to situate gamers' engagement along the industry's production process.*

### 5.1.Types of Customer Engagement

Throughout the interviews and ethnographic impressions, different types of active engagement behaviours emerged. Initially, twenty-five (25) specific forms of engagement were differentiated, indicating a likelihood of types of engagement of a higher order. Consequentially, after further analysis, the following four (4) types of active engagement behaviours were identified: (1) *Co-Creation Engagement Behaviours*, (2) *Social Engagement Behaviours*, (3) *Influencing Engagement Behaviours* and (4) *Observing Engagement Behaviours*. An overview of the different types, their exact definitions and examples from both engaged gamers and other possible customers is provided in Table 6.

These types of engagement are primarily based on the empirical findings, but also reflect prior research. Following Keller's (2013) argumentation, this study defines the use of resources such as energy, time and money as required for each type of engagement. Furthermore, the following definitions also consider knowledge as valuable resource in engagement behaviours, as several interviewees pointed out. John stated that “[...] gaming has maybe; maybe it makes me push myself, makes me learn stuff. I've learned podcasting, editing, video editing, because of my interest”. His answer not only his high level of engagement, as John deliberately chose to learn new skills to follow his interest, but also that knowledge is paramount for his engagement. Besides the empirical data, prior research confirmed that game-related co-creation activities often require highly specific levels of knowledge (c.f. Sotamaa 2010, Weber 2014). Consequentially, we argue that knowledge constitutes a further resource for engagement behaviours.

The first type of active engagement identified is co-creation. *Co-creation behaviours* are defined as *behaviours that require the use of resources such as energy, time, money or knowledge to change the focal object directly or indirectly*. This type delineates all active engagement activities that co-create a product, brand or company through financial means,

feedback and the use of skills to produce game content. In regard to financial support, Olivia emphasised the co-creational aspect stemming from crowdfunding:

[...] there's a lot of games that need help, like, if you want the game produced, and you want like more control over the game, you can donate [...], and we'll [the developers; A/N] make it so and so. [...]

Besides the financial co-creation aspect, voluntary feedback plays a major role in co-creation behaviours – Klas highlighted for example the value of feedback by experienced players:

[...] there are always some players, like, ranked top 50 in the world, they know the game, I think, and if they say: Hey guys, this weapon is way too strong or way too weak", then it's important that an update is introduced to fix it, that's something I find really important [...] [authors' translation from German]

Finally, co-creation also includes user-generated content, in the video game industry often referred to as modding<sup>6</sup> (Sotamaa 2010, Weber 2014). Olaf confirmed the value-added by modifications:

[...] I do use modifications for a couple of games. It depends, usually it's just for personal, I mean obviously, it's for personal gain. They're not that specific. For example, for Paradox games, I'm very heavily history interested, so it's more of an enhancement of the original game. [...]

Consequentially, the empirical data also confirmed the co-creation of value identified in prior engagement studies (Jaakkola and Alexander 2014).

A second type of engagement was identified as based on *social engagement behaviours*. They are defined as *behaviours that require the use of resources such as energy, time, money or knowledge to create or experience a sense of group belonging related to a focal object*. It thus encircles all activities focused on group interaction. Forms of active engagement therefore include the participation in online and offline communities or groups that are related to the focal object. Madeleine, a Swedish cosplayer<sup>7</sup>, stated that the community aspect was paramount for her:

[...] And also for me cosplay is a very social activity. Like these ladies here I met through cosplay and a lot of my other friends I met through cosplay. You can interact with people; I have friends all over Europe because of cosplay. So it's a big part of it

<sup>6</sup> The creation of modifications for video games is often titled as ‘modding’, the corresponding creators are referred to as ‘modders’ Weber (2014)

<sup>7</sup> Cosplay refers to the activity of creating costumes based on characters from games or movies and incorporating the chosen character at events.



too. And I don't think that I would have continued to cosplay if it wasn't for the community around cosplay that's very supportive, fun and engaging. [...]

Klas elaborated on his guild<sup>8</sup> meetings outside the game, thus underlining the social function for this type of engagement:

Here at my place, we have an annual guild meeting that is attended by up to 20 persons from everywhere, from Germany, Switzerland, Austria [...] [authors' translation from German]

He further explained that he even regards the creation of a community as the first step for engagement, mentioning money as one of the required resources for social engagement behaviours:

[everything that is related to the creation of a community, that is the first step for a game [...] someone brings in his engagement, for example, a community, a clan, a guild, whatever you want to call it, gathers people under his banner, watches out that everything goes well. And that's something you can enlarge to the infinite, from creating a Facebook group to stay in contact, to people who say, 'okay, let's make a homepage, rent a server, set up a TeamSpeak server', offer different communication channels, which costs money [...] [authors' translation from German]

Based on these insights, this study argues that *social engagement behaviours* form an important type of engagement. Building and belonging to brand communities (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, Brodie *et al.* 2013), consumer tribes (Cova *et al.* 2011) or other forms of groups that are characterised by their relation to a focal object, can be therefore seen as a second type of consumer engagement behaviour.

The third type that emerged from the empirical data is of an influencing nature. Influencing engagement behaviours are defined as behaviours that require the use of resources such as energy, time, money or knowledge to influence other stakeholders' and non-stakeholders' perception of the focal object by sharing experiences, opinions and interpretations. Influencing behaviours comprise of a broad range of engagement behaviours that aim at changing other persons' perception of a product, brand or company. The existence of influencing engagement behaviours was also previously confirmed by Jaakkola and Alexander (2014), although related to value co-creation. Influencing engagement is of paramount importance, as gamers engaged in these activities often act as a multiplier. Bernd, an independent developer of video games, confirmed this when he stated:

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<sup>8</sup> Guilds refer to groups or community-like social institutions, often in role-playing games (RPGs) that have a certain structure, hierarchy and an institutional character. Players engaged in guilds usually play on a regular basis together.



We mostly watched the big influencers and saw what they reacted to and how they reacted to it. And from there we took conclusions on what we thought would generate the most buzz pretty much. [...] We had our idea how they would react from the very beginning by watching all the influencers and see how they reacted. But then we took in play testers as well.

While he clearly emphasised the significance of influencing engagement behaviour, he also pointed out that the aforementioned co-creational engagement is equally important. Depending on the aim, they may even be perceived as amalgamated, as Klas revealed:

[...] through [streaming; A/N], you have the possibility to reach several people, and through the reach you build, you can influence the development a little bit, especially for games in the early access phase. [authors' translation from German]

However, *influencing engagement behaviours* also comprises of gamers' interpretations of a focal object, including fan art and comics, through which others people's perceptions are changed. The short following conversation highlighted this:

Madeleine: Well, there's fan art, people who draw illustrations. Fan comics, two of my friends make a Dragon Age and Mass Effect comics, called Champions and Heroes, go check them out! So they do comics with the different characters.

Elsa: Looking at their Facebook page for example, they usually post drawings and fan art and cosplay and all different things. And I think it's really nice when companies really do that.

Madeleine: It's free marketing, seriously [...]

Besides the emphasis on fan contributions, it also reveals clearly that engaged gamers are often aware of their function, marking their engagement behaviours as deliberate activities.

The final type of behaviour that gamers engage in is referred to as *observing engagement behaviours*. They are defined as *behaviours that require the use of resources such as energy, time and money to observe and follow developments centred on or related to a focal object*. *Observing engagement behaviours* are, in comparison the other three types, more passive and based on following or observing specific games, brands, teams or companies. In contrast to the aforementioned types of engagement, they only require a limited amount of knowledge, as pointed out by Lari:

[...] we're watching it as a sport. So it's a leisure where you don't actually play the game, you just enjoy the game like a sport. eSports is the term I guess. [...]

In comparison to other forms of engagement, observing engagement is often regarded as a more casual activity – Olaf referred to it as “casual” activity, while Max pointed out that he's “not a hard-core fan”. Nevertheless, Max' statement indicates the existence of hard-core fans. When asked about streaming activities, Anna stated:



No, I don't stream, but yes, I watch a lot of Twitch and follow NiP [...] that is my team! [authors' translation from Swedish]

Her description of Ninjas in Pyjamas as 'my team' reveals a strong attachment and identification with the team, indicating that she can be considered a hard-core fan. The existence of hard-core fans was also confirmed during the micro-ethnography at the DreamHack Masters in Malmö: Several times, individual persons wearing fan clothing started to loudly cheer for their favourite team, often motivating other people to join the choir, creating fan chants comparable to those in football matches. Therefore, observing engagement behaviour spans from casual interest to hard-core fan behaviour.

Table 6: Overview of different Types of Engagement

| Type                                     | Definition                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Examples                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Co-Creation Engagement Behaviours</b> | <i>Behaviours that require the use of resources such as energy, time, money or knowledge to change the focal object directly or indirectly.</i>                                                                                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Modifying the game</li><li>▪ Testing (e.g. beta participation) &amp; Feedback</li><li>▪ Financial support (e.g. crowdfunding)</li></ul>           |
| <b>Social Engagement Behaviours</b>      | <i>Behaviours that require the use of resources such as energy, time, money or knowledge to create or experience a sense of group belonging related to a focal object.</i>                                                               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Creating brand communities/groups</li><li>▪ Group or community meetings</li></ul>                                                                 |
| <b>Influencing Engagement Behaviours</b> | <i>Behaviours that require the use of resources such as energy, time, money or knowledge to influence other stakeholders' and non-stakeholders' perception of the focal object by sharing experiences, opinions and interpretations.</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Streaming (e.g. on twitch.tv) or creating and sharing of YouTube videos</li><li>▪ Writing reviews, comments and other influencing posts</li></ul> |
| <b>Observing Engagement Behaviour</b>    | <i>Behaviours that require the use of resources such as energy, time and money to observe and follow developments centred on or related to a focal object.</i>                                                                           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Watching streams to follow specific brands/players</li><li>▪ Fan behaviours (e.g. watching tournaments)</li></ul>                                 |

## 5.2. Motivations

The previous section provided an overview of the different types of engagement behaviours, however, to understand the phenomenon of the engaged gamer better, insight into the drivers or motivations is indispensable. Throughout the study, twenty (20) specific motivations for



gamers' engagement were identified. A further analysis revealed that most of these motivations fit into the motivational categories occurring in-game, which were introduced beforehand: social motivations, immersive motivations and achievement-related motivations (cf. Table 1). Although these dimensions were originally designed to analyse the motivations gamers have to play games (Williams *et al.* 2008), in virtue of Castranova's (2008) argumentation that the magic circle, the membrane separating the real from the game is fading, they may also be applicable to outside motivations. The data analysis revealed de facto that the different motivations engaged gamers mention also fit within them.

However, these three (3) dimensions cover only motivations for positive expressions of engagement, while negative expressions related to frustration, anger or sadness are not reflected. Nonetheless, several interviewees clearly expressed that negative emotions served as a catalyser for their engagement. Due to this lack of representation, this study proposes to use a fourth (4) motivational dimension, representing a range of negative emotions. One example is John emphasising the influencing element of his engagement that lead directly to negative WOM for Sony:

They [Sony, A/N] got completely fucked up. Like botched beyond recognition, I cannot play, like uh Tekken 3, I actually had to show some people, like from other countries.

Besides sharing his experiences and, thus, influencing other people, he also highlights that frustration occurs due to corporate misbehaviour, stating:

The worst experience I've ever had. Oh, yeah, that's, actually finding out about the 50hz system that we had in Europe. This went on all the way up until the Dreamcast, PS2 era. So everything that came before that, all of the games that we had in Europe got shafted to - can I swear? - \*laughing\*

Furthermore, due to the agreement that negative emotions can definitely serve as motivations (e.g. Nordmarker 2010), this paper identifies *Frustration* as a fourth motivation for gamers to engage beyond purchase and playing.



Table 7: Motivational Dimensions of Video Game Engagement

| Motivational Dimension | Definition                                                                                                              | Interviewees' Statements                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Social</b>          | <i>Forming and maintaining relationships, e.g. communities, teams and guilds, through communication and interaction</i> | <p>"I do it for myself and sometimes I get comments that are very supportive. Because it's a social thing. And I also have friends who also do it, so sometimes we do collaborations." (John, 34)</p> <p>"this experience, away from the computer, talking personally with the people, getting to know each other, establishing friendships." (Klas, 23) [authors' translation from German]</p> |
| <b>Immersion</b>       | <i>Full involvement and curiosity in the game world, both within and outside of the game.</i>                           | <p>"Well, [watching YouTube videos of other people playing games; A/N] is a way of travelling. I mean you travel with someone that you don't know, they're just guiding you with their voice. And usually either you choose a universe that you know, like Pokémon, or you choose a universe that you don't know!" (Olivia, 32)</p>                                                             |
| <b>Achievement</b>     | <i>Gaining status and skill through competition, challenges and advancement</i>                                         | <p>"Yes, I'm the only Swedish cosplayer who's won the DreamHack championship. With Spectre from DotA. [Defence of the Ancients, an online game]" (Madeleine, 26)</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| <b>Frustration</b>     | <i>Thwarted in the process of obtaining satisfaction through the interaction with video games</i>                       | <p>"They're just terrible. You should look up Jim Sterling, who's made a whole video series about why Konami is awful and why everybody should just not buy their stuff anymore. So I'd recommend you watch that because I could talk for hours." (John, 34)</p>                                                                                                                                |

### 5.3.Typology

In a next step, the four (4) types of engagement were linked to the four (4) motivations identified throughout the research. Some types of engagement appear to be strongly associated with certain motivational dimensions. Co-creating activities, for example, are often based on achievement-related motivations – the interviewees often referred to ideas such as controlling or influencing the development process, increasing influence through their activities or being perceived as an achieved expert, "their nerd consultant" (Frank, 35).

Observing, on the other hand, was never connected by the interviewees with social or achievement-related motivations. Instead, most interviewees emphasised it as a way to engage deeper with the specific focal object. The following Table 8 presents an overview of the different types of engagement linked with specific motivations for their engagement behaviours.



Table 8: Examples of interviewees' motivations in relation to the type of engagement

| Motivation Type \ Social Behaviours | Social Immersion                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Achievement                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Frustration                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Co-Creation Engagement Behaviours   | N/A                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Well, I volunteer on all the DreamHack events here in Sweden and, I love cosplay with in-game still, so I am engaged in that world. (Sven, 27)                                                                                | I mean, I've sent complaints, right. Only to Ubisoft and if it's, and I hate their customer service. (Olaf, 24)                                                                                                |
| Social Engagement Behaviours        | I have been part of founding this organisation because of my interest. But that is more because I want the social discussion with other people [...] about their interests [...] because that makes you feel much better and not alone in the world." (Frank, 35) | And I also engage with the community, like the people who still go. I still talk to them. Because they're still my friends, so I keep in touch, we Skype a lot. When I can't go there, we talk over Skype instead. (John, 34) | N/A                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| Influencing Engagement Behaviours   | N/A                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | And then we'll see who is the best. And you can discuss like tactics, you can talk about, sometimes people are surprised like. [...] That is a whole, that is a very motivator. (John, 34)                                    | [...] through [streaming; A/N] you have the possibility to reach several people, and through the reach you build, you can influence the development a little bit, authors' translation from German] (Klas, 23) |
| Observing Engagement Behaviours     | N/A                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | I really like Na'Vi, I used to watch them back in the day. So at the moment I really enjoy seeing [...] some of the more old-school players. (Axel, 24)                                                                       | But all you read on <i>Thibia</i> is like frustration from the players and excuses from the makers. (Olaf, 24)                                                                                                 |



#### 5.4.Towards an Integrated Brand Building Model

After having identified the different types of engagement behaviours and their underlying motivations, we argue that engagement constitutes an elementary part of the industry's brand management. Based on the previously described model of the video game production process and lifecycle and introduces the relevant brand-related concepts of identity and positioning, we propose the following model allowing to situate gamers' engagement along the process.

During the concept development, not only the game's features, content and intended market position need to be discussed, but also the brand that is created through the game. We therefore propose to use the concept of brand identity (e.g. Kapferer 2012, Keller 2013) to define the relevant attributes, as it allows to plan future branding and marketing activity, reflecting the desired identity of the video game brand and leading towards a clear market positioning.

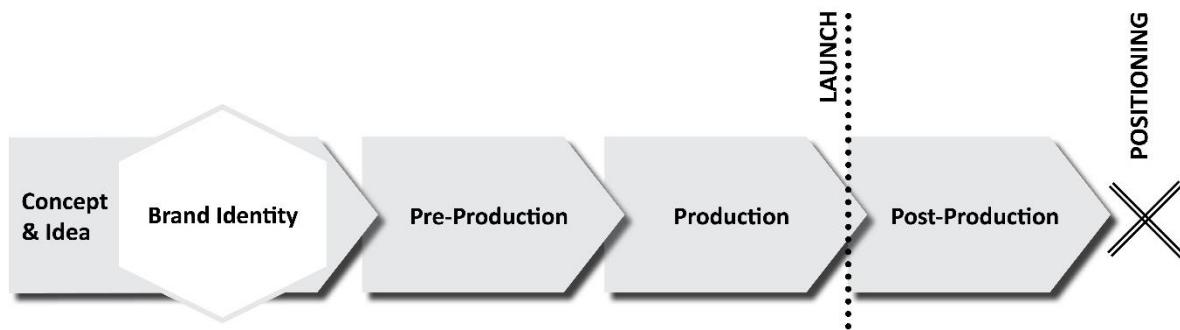


Figure 5: Integrated Brand Building Model



## 6. Consequences of Gamers' Engagement

The following case studies describe and analyse two (2) cases that serve to empirically test the proposed typology and to closer analyse the impact engaged gamers have on the identity, communication, reputation and positioning of the brand and their managerial consequences. Each case first provides first a short background, before identifying the specific engagement behaviours involved in a second step, and finally, in a third step, their impact on the brand.

### 6.1. The Release of *SimCity* (2013)

In March 2013, the game development studio Maxis Emeryville, owned by Electronic Arts (EA), was set to release the highly anticipated PC game *SimCity* (Electronic Arts 2013b). It was the first new *SimCity* game to be released since the fourth iteration in the series a decade earlier (Behm *et al.* 2016). At this time, Maxis' corporate mother Electronic Arts was facing several problems: Customers were dissatisfied with the games released by Electronic Arts, complaining that the company was focused on profit rather than innovation (Behm *et al.* 2016). In 2012, EA had won the Consumerist's<sup>9</sup> so called Golden Poo award, being voted the worst company in America, beating banks and oil companies to this little coveted prize (Morran 2013).

Maxis, on the other hand, although fully-owned by EA, enjoyed a reputation of being original and innovative due to their bestselling *SimCity* and *Sims* franchises (Behm *et al.* 2016). Previous *SimCity* games sold millions of copies and were still being played by loyal fans (Simtropolis 2016). Before its release, the new *SimCity* was tested and rated 9.5/10 by the video game journal Polygon.com and had won a PC Game of the Year award (Rose 2012, Pitts 2013).

One feature implemented to *SimCity* required the game to be constantly connected to EA's servers, thus forcing the gamer to be always online when playing the game. While Maxis stated that the always-online requirement was essential for some multiplayer features introduced to the game, gamers saw this as a way to exacerbate piracy efforts by introducing Digital Rights Management (DRM) disguised as a feature (Behm *et al.* 2016). This sparked engagement long before the launch, including mostly comments online. Furthermore, gamers discussed the problems the always-online feature could pose for modifications, as these are often interfering with server connections (Simtropolis 2016). When the game was released, massive server

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<sup>9</sup>The Consumerist is an American online magazine, focusing on consumer-related topics. The magazine yearly awards the Golden Poo Award to America's worst company, as voted in an online poll.



problems occurred and many gamers were neither able to download nor to play the game. These problems continued for almost two weeks, leaving many gamers unsatisfied (Behm *et al.* 2016).

### 6.1.1. Engagement

The phenomenon of the engaged gamer was obvious long before the actual release of *SimCity* – 19.654 available modifications and files for the *SimCity* games, more than 107 million file downloads and active discussions on forums ten years after *SimCity 4*'s release (the *SimCity 4* modding forums alone account for more than 240.000 comments) clearly indicate the existence of engaged gamers who love their brand (Simtropolis 2016). However, soon after the always-online requirement and the integrated multiplayer features became public, the engagement behaviours changed dramatically.

The motivation for active engagement was now frustration and forums and comment sections bristled with negative comments, many of them commenting on the always-online requirement and shaping the perception of *SimCity* (2013), thus constituting influencing engagement behaviours. Besides writing comments, influencing engagement occurred in the form of voting for EA in the aforementioned Consumerist poll for the worst company in America, affecting the brand's reputation severely (Behm *et al.* 2016).

### 6.1.2. Impact

The existence of the active and value-creating modding communities clearly indicated a positive reputation attributed to the *SimCity* brand. The user About47Pandas summarised this, stating that “*SimCity 4* was great success and everyone keeps referring to it as if it is the bible itself”. He then further elaborates that building on the established *SimCity* brand and the well-perceived prequel can be regarded as a challenge, as introducing the new always-online requirement and the connected multiplayer mechanics to the series is contested by gamers.

Besides the general reputational issue, the positioning of previous *SimCity* titles further exacerbates the problems: It was always positioned and perceived as a single-player game, featuring individual play in a non-linear, sandbox game style. The series' brand identity was therefore closely linked to its single player mode. KeanoManu, a forum member, summarised it:

It's the same when talking to people in real life. I know a few people who would be considered as casual players and not hard-core fans as most of those who write here. Not a single of them is positive about the online stuff. Even the casual players want to play the game in single player. It's simply that type of game.



Other users agreed with his statement, stating that the “requirement of internet might be a very bad move on a single player focused game” (Dijego), that “a huge majority of SimCity-fans prefer the game to be offline and 100% singe player” (KeanoManu) and emphasising the fact that “SimCity will always be a single player game” (Shark7). The user Moskva even refers to “the single player always online connection” as an “abuse, since you’ve PAID [for] the product and should be able to use it (singleplayer) always”. A user named Azurespecter concluded:

*SimCity*<sup>10</sup> is no longer a single player game. You gotta stop thinking that this new game is a sequel to SC4. It’s a complete reboot, new engine, new purpose, new plan, new gameplay, new functionality.

This user pointed out how much *SimCity* differs from previous titles, arguing that it cannot be regarded as sequel. However, the utilisation of the SimCity brand clearly indicates that *SimCity* is still linked to the established brand identity and the existing fan base. Consequently, some users showed hostile reactions to the indented identity alteration: The user cirugo threatened, citing the previous comment, that he “will do whatever is in my power to make sure it [*SimCity*; A/N] fails”. Another forum member named Mr\_Maison concluded:

I, like many other players, am mostly interested in the single player mode as that is how we play [*SimCity* 4; A/N]. Can the community create some sort of petition against this bad decision [...] Here we go again, a city builder is primarily a solo experience.

Besides highlighting the identity problems caused by the always-online feature, he also proposed further influencing engagement by creating a petition. In fact, a petition requesting EA to remove the always-online DRM from SimCity and future games was signed by 79.714 supporters on change.org (change.org 2013). Subsequently, the petition was covered by several online journals and websites, further increasing the reach and emphasising the potential influence gamers’ engagement can achieve.

Based on the analysed articles, internet documents and expressions of consumers, we conclude that the SimCity brand as well as the corporate brands Electronic Arts and Maxis were severely damaged by gamers’ engagement behaviours. Especially the alteration of essential parts of SimCity’s brand identity, such as the single player focus, were contested by gamers and provoked negative engagement behaviours. Even though events such as being voted the worst company in America, the retirement of Electronic Art’s CEO John Ricitiello on March

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<sup>10</sup> To prevent confusion between the brand SimCity and the *SimCity* game released in 2013, game titles in original quotes were formatted as italics.



30 in 2013 (Electronic Arts 2016) and the closure of the Maxis Emeryville in 2015 (Sarkar 2015) are not directly linkable to gamers' engagement, the "big black eye over the last few weeks with the botched launch of *SimCity*" (Cutler 2013) created by them can be interpreted as a major contributor.

Besides its negative effects on the brands of *SimCity*, EA and Maxis, the case of *SimCity* further provides insight into a specific consumer-industry conflict being fought: It is based on the dispute whether games are products or services. This discussion is closely linked to the question of ownership, as consumers often perceive their games as goods, and thus as their very own possession, whereas the video game industry often refers to them as service (Lane 2012). This transformation towards a service-based industry is emphasised by EA's strategy, highlighting their reduced range of products and the increased number of services provided:

[...] we have aggressively reduced the number of significant titles releases that we launch each year. In fiscal year 2009, we published over 60 packaged goods products, each of which was primarily a stand-alone game with few or no online features, and in each fiscal year since, we have launched fewer titles on consoles, while building additional online features, content and services around each one of our titles. In fiscal year 2013, we published 13 titles on video game consoles and PCs (each with additional online features, content and/or services)" (Electronic Arts 2013a, p. 3).

Gamers, however, understood the always-online feature as a threat to their ownership, fearing that Electronic Arts could one day decide to shut down the servers, rendering the game unusable. The user Å§haÅ--Ñ€Å\$hÅŽo commented that "we'll [the gamers, A/N] be short of a game that we paid \$60 for (and most likely subscriptions and DLC's they tack on to the game)." Another user named GenXisT further elaborates:

We're effectively stuck with a paper-weight game because we can no longer play when EA pulls the servers. That isn't really fair for ANY product, not just a game. I want to drive my car **when I want to**. I want to watch my TV **when I want to**. I want to cook in my pans **when I want to**. It is entirely disingenuous, dishonest and borderline fraudulent.

Hundreds of comments repeat these fears and underline that gamers feel like they are losing control over their games, clearly indicating an underlying tension between gamers and the industry. Indeed, fear is only one aspect, as many commentators show hate and express hostility towards the industry. A user called soltangris stated:

The battle EA and the gaming is waging for the constantly online issue is only a chapter in the greater battle for the future of media distribution. And we, the users, have to stand our ground, if we don't want to fall under an even heavier capitalistic slavery in the coming years.



This comment affirms a hostile, even belligerent situation in which gamers and industry are situated, leading to boiling emotions, harsh expressions of engagement and increased activity. Understanding this war-like relation is paramount, as the management of video game brands is closely linked to the abovementioned battle. Tampering with the identity of SimCity as a single-player game already created tensions, however, combining this change of a beloved brand's identity with a sense of losing control and ownership, finally sparked the clamour in the gaming community.

To conclude, the *SimCity* case illustrated the impact engaged gamers can have on a brand – as not only SimCity as a product brand was affected, but also the corporate brands Maxis and Electronic Arts. Gamers influencing behaviour, in the form of comments, and commenting videos, were identified – EA being voted the worst company in America for a second time in 2013 affirmed the efficiency of their engagement. Furthermore, EA finally gave in and introduced an offline mode for *SimCity* – giving in to the overwhelming negative reactions (Sarkar, 2014).

#### 6.1.3. Integrated process model

The case revealed primarily influencing engagement throughout the production and post-production phase, as shown below:

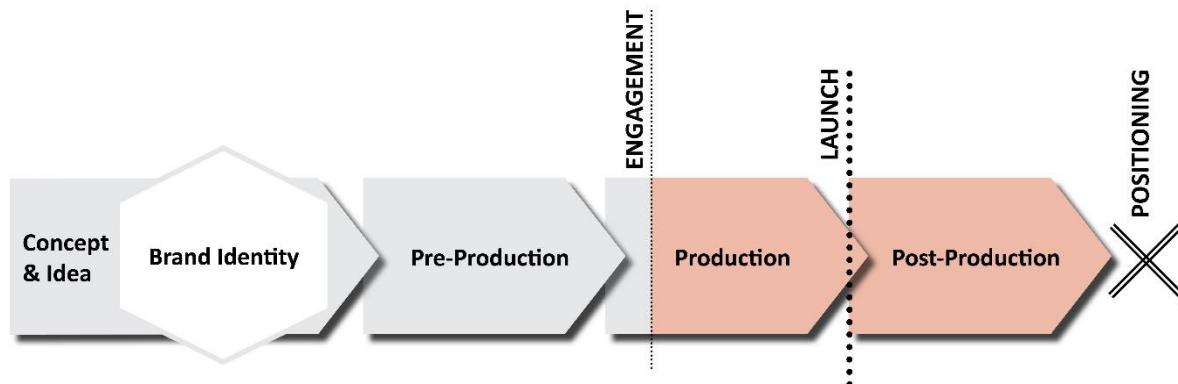


Figure 6: Engagement Behaviours situated along the Integrated Brand Building Model



## 6.2.The ESRB Re-Rating of The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion (2006)

*The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* was a highly anticipated role-playing game (RPG) sequel first released March 20, 2006 for PC and Xbox 360 and a year later for the PlayStation 3 (Onyett 2006b). The game received great reviews and within one year, it sold over four (4) million copies worldwide, rendering it a very successful release for developer and co-publisher Bethesda Game Studios and co-publisher Take Two Interactive (Brightman 2011).

Despite its success, the game was not spared from controversy. The Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) gives out ratings for nearly all video games released in North America. These range from E, suitable for everyone to AO, adults only (18+) (ESRB 2016a). The ESRB are only supposed to evaluate the content that is available on the disc or digital download from the publisher, not user-generated content created by engaged gamers, such as modifications. These are popular for *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* and even a decade later (May, 2016) one well-known modding website sports over 27.000 mods available created by 10.000 members, with 25.000 daily downloads summing up to a total of 146.045.682 downloads since 2006 (nexusmods 2016).

*The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* was originally released with a T for Teen (13+) rating as it contained some violence that could be considered unsuitable for children. However, on May 3, 2006, it became the second game ever<sup>11</sup> to get re-rated by the ESRB, to M for Mature (17+). The reason being that a modification created by a third party, not affiliated with Bethesda, allowed some of the female characters of the game to appear topless. The modification quickly became popular (Totilo 2006) and prompted the ESRB to re-evaluate their original rating, and when doing so, they found the game featured more violence than expected and nudity available with the modification installed (Brightman 2006).

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<sup>11</sup> The only other game to get a new rating after release at that time was 2005's Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas that had hidden sexual content available on the original disc, which was later unlocked by hackers and led to its original M sticker getting upgraded to an AO rating Totilo (2006). For further information, research the so called Hot Coffee mod.

### 6.2.1. Engagement

Since the creation of active engagement is understood as an objective of brand building (Keller 2009, 2013, Burgess and Spinks 2014), it is therefore sought after by developers. Hence, the PC version of *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* came with a tool named *TES Construction Set* (CS), to facilitate the creation of modifications and expand the experience of the game (Onyett 2006a). It constituted thus a deliberate corporate decision aiming at engaging gamers in co-creation behaviours and supported the reputation of The Elder Scrolls series to be mod-friendly. A user named scazza emphasised:

Bethesda released the modding tools also under good intention (which it shows, with all the fantastic mods people have released themselves).

The modification that caught the attention of the ESRB, allowing female in-game characters to appear topless was created by a woman going by the nickname Maeyanie. It first appeared on a fan website of the game in the same month as the game was released (Zenke 2007a), where it was available as a free download. Maeyanie's alteration of the game received no support from the developers, despite the general availability of their TES Construction Set. Consequently, Bethesda could not influence the modification nor the engaged gamer. As for the inappropriateness of seeing some characters topless, Zenke (2007a) stated that "the modification was about as erotic as a doctor's visit".

Creating a modification for any game constitutes a co-creation engagement behaviour. Maeyanie's motivation is based on her frustration with "[the] government/society/whatever forcing companies to 'protect our innocent population from seeing those evil dirty things 50% of them possess personally anyways'" (Zenke 2007a). However, she felt no frustration towards the developers as she expressed in an interview after the re-rating: "I especially regret any harm to Bethesda, which has always been my favourite game developer because of the *Elder Scrolls* series" (McInnes 2006). Her modification and the accompanying media coverage triggered other gamers to comment on the topic, constituting an influencing behaviour, as it shaped the public image of all related stakeholders and their respective brands. To analyse the impact of Maeyanie's modification, a total of 148 posts across one forum and one comment section have been investigated.

### 6.2.2. Impact

Despite that the ESRB are only supposed to rate content available in the original release of the game, they decided nonetheless to investigate if this should in some way change the rating.



Patricia Vance, president of the ESRB in 2006, clearly stated that it is not the role of the ESRB to rate user-generated content (Zenke 2007a). This type of content is instead labelled as “Online interaction not rated by the ESRB” (ESRB 2016b) on a game’s packaging and by warning parents that modifications may alter the gameplay in a way that is not in line with the ESRB ratings. However, even though Maeyanie had created a modification, it was decided by the ESRB that it used art already available on the disc and should therefore be rated. While investigating the game, Patricia Vance said they also “discovered far more blood and gore than had been disclosed” (Zenke 2007b). This led to the ESRB quickly re-evaluating the game to a Mature rating, both because of partial nudity being available through modding and it featuring more violence than other Teen rated games (Adams 2006). Bethesda responded by saying they should not be punished for actions taken by people engaged in creating modifications, however they refused to change the game (Zenke 2007a). Instead, they accepted the ruling and, as a result, new labels were sent out for all game boxes at retailers (Adams 2006). Some retailers responded by pulling *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* from their shelves until rating changes were applied, and even though Bethesda responded quickly, the entire debacle was costly (Carless 2006, Zenke 2007a).

The co-creation engagement behaviour displayed in this case occurred in the post-production phase. The modification was released four (4) days after the game was available to consumers and by the time the game was re-rated six (6) weeks later, the mod had been downloaded about 57.000 times (Totilo 2006). With implications regarding identity, positioning and specifically, communication, Bethesda decided to comply with the ESRB decision quickly. In order to protect their reputation, Bethesda sent out a press release stating:

We believe that this critically acclaimed game is not typical of Mature rated titles, and does not present the central themes of violence that are common to those products [...] We submitted a 60-page document listing all explicit language, acts and scenes in the game [to the ESRB; A/N]” (Bethesda, 2006)

However, Bethesda did not blame any other stakeholder, saying:

We value the role of the ESRB and believe the rating agency plays a valuable role in regulating our industry. As always, we will continue work in good faith to comply fully with the ESRB’s standards and policies.” (Bethesda Softworks LLC 2006).

The Elder Scrolls game series brand enjoys an “almost reverential status among fans...” (McInnes 2006) and this attachment to the games felt by its fans increases the likelihood that they will publicly defend or promote the brand (Fedorikhin *et al.* 2008). There was an active discussion on online forums about the topless mod and the way the ESRB and Bethesda handled



the situation. Mostly, the discussion concerned who to blame and whether or not the new rating was correct, if partially based on a modification. A total of 48 posts displayed a negative opinion of the ESRB, compared to only a seven (7) that were positive. The user Blaxton expressed his negative sentiment, stating that the ESRB lied about the reasons for the re-rating:

[...] the ESRB has displayed their own inadequacy. They could have been frank and simply told us that yes, the nudity mod was the reason for the rating change, but instead they said basically: in addition, we can't get the job done right the first time, so let's add gore and violence to the list of reasons for the amendment.

The negative views on the ESRB can be seen as indirect support for Bethesda and *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*, as they represented the other side of the conflict. However, 41 posts expressed direct support for *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*, Bethesda and the way they acted after the ruling. The user called The Boss of You, illustrated this:

As far as the issue of whether ‘Bethesda was to blame’ or not, Joe nailed it. Holding them accountable and judging their work as M rated or pornographic would be like throwing the parishioners out of church for being naked under their clothes.

Further elucidating the willingness by fans of *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* to defend and support Bethesda, the user winnie\_tee questioned the ESRB’s explanation for the new rating:

It seems Bethesda did nothing WRONG when it came to the violence in the game, I have no idea why Vance is all over them about the violence?? I doubt they lied and said the only violence in the game involved throwing mushrooms at ponies or something, so the only reason for them being surprised at the “more extreme depictions of blood and gore” would be because they didn’t do their freaking jobs properly the first time.

From the perspective of Bethesda, there was a tension between the identity and positioning of the game. Their previously quoted press release after the re-rating further stated:

[...] nothing was hidden from the ratings agency, [...] Bethesda didn’t create a game with nudity and does not intend that nudity appear in Oblivion. There is no nude female character in a section of the game that can be ‘unlocked.’ [...] With regard to violence, Bethesda advised the ESRB during the ratings process that violence and blood effects were frequent in the game - checking the box on the form that is the maximum warning. [...] We further advised that the game contained occasional torture, vulgar acts, and gore. (Bethesda Softworks LLC 2006)

Based on this, the game received its original T rating, on which its positioning was based. However, the secondary data analysis revealed that the content was perceived as adult oriented by several engaged gamers. The user Gamereviewgod elaborated “I can’t imagine ANYONE playing through this and thinking ‘Boy, this sure is a T rated game.’” Another user named ss\_ebonclaw agreed “with the re-rating of the game to M. There’s some content in there that even I was floored by, just from the sheer amount of innuendo, or how graphic it was.”



Consequently, the intended positioning in the market conflicts with the perceived identity, creating a tension that resulted in communication problems – Bethesda Softworks LLC (2006) states in one and same press release that *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* “does not represent central themes of violence that are common to those products [M-rated titles, A/N]”, while informing that the game features “occasional torture, vulgar acts and gore”.

To conclude, modding co-creation engagement behaviours mostly takes place in the post-production phase, after the game is released. The impact of the controversial topless modification resulted in a total change of positioning, affected the game’s reputation, both positively and negatively, and forced the publisher to release new communications that aligned with the new identity.

#### 6.2.3. Integrated Brand Building model

The case revealed two different engagement behaviours: First, co-creation engagement behaviour as showcased by Maeyanie, and shortly after the ESRB decision influencing engagement showcased by *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* gamers.

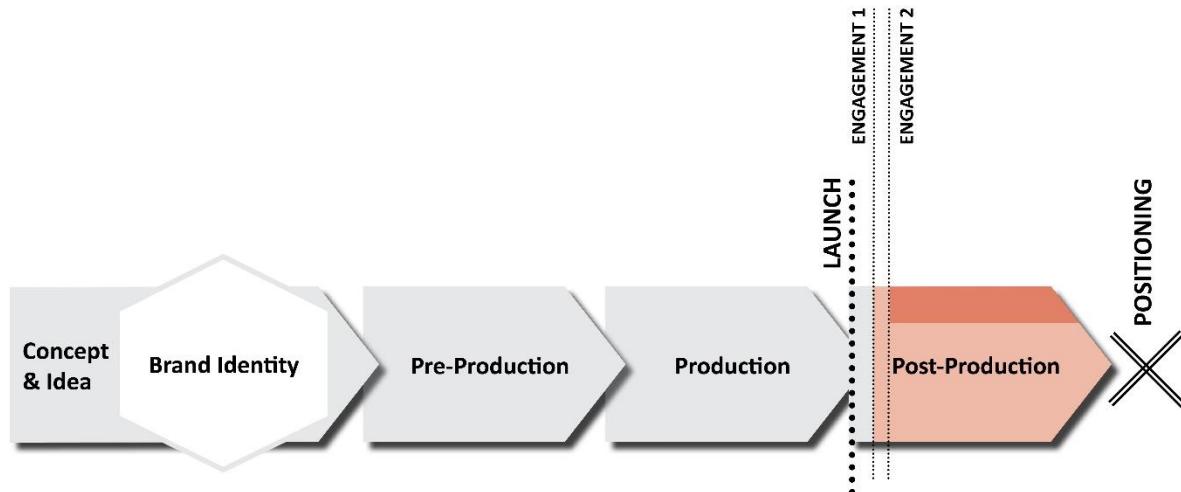


Figure 7: Engagement Behaviours situated along the Integrated Brand Building Model



## 7. Analysis and Discussion

*This chapter aims at providing an in-depth analysis of the consequences of engaged gamers for the industry and the strategic brand management implications. Furthermore, it discusses the findings and outcomes of our research in relation to previously introduced authors and theories to situate our research within the different fields contributing to it.*

### 7.1. Gamers' Engagement Behaviour Types

In our research we were able to identify four (4) dimensions of gamer engagement behaviours: Co-creation engagement behaviours, social engagement behaviours, influencing engagement behaviours and observing engagement behaviours. These categories partly concur with the types Jaakkola and Alexander (2014) found. However, our research revealed that their categories did not cover all engagement types related to the phenomenon of the engaged gamer (cf. Jaakkola and Alexander 2014). In contrast to many other conceptual studies focused on the concept of engagement (e.g. Brodie *et al.* 2011, Dessart *et al.* 2016), our focus was not on engagement dimensionality, but on underlying motivations. Indeed, it can be argued that our focus on active engagement (Keller 2009, 2013), the engagement we defined as occurring beyond purchase and consumption, can be regarded as unidimensional (Brodie *et al.* 2011).

While we agree that engagement dimensions are important for the further conceptualisation of engagement (Hollebeek 2011a), our study's focus lies on understanding the phenomenon itself and therefore employs motivations. Consequently, by deciding to utilise motivations (Yee 2006), an essential part of consumer behaviour and an established concept (e.g. Schiffman *et al.* 2012), rather than investigating engagement dimensions, we were able to create a typology closer to the actual phenomenon. Furthermore, through the combination of engagement behaviour types and their underlying motivations, we enhanced the proposed typology, as it allows to directly address the respective behaviours through relevant motivational dimensions. This also increases the applicability of the typology in marketing and brand management contexts.

### 7.2. Engaged Gamers as External and Internal Stakeholders

Internal stakeholders in a video game company are usually delineated as the parties employed by the company throughout all phases of the Integrated Brand Building model (cf. Figure 5). It includes developers generating ideas, the growing teams as a game reaches the

development phase and actors engaged in publishing, who are directly vested in either the development studio or the publishing company and, therefore, heavily affecting the output.

Consumers, on the other hand, are usually considered external stakeholders of a company. Prototypical consumers are regarded as external stakeholders, as they purchase and consume the goods and services produced and offered by companies, but do neither own nor work for the company. Consequentially, consumers power to affect the product or service is usually regarded as limited and only reflected in market research of market-driven companies to improve their products and services (e.g. Kumar *et al.* 2000).

In contrast to what we termed prototypical consumers, engaged gamers affect the product, brand and offer of video game companies heavily. Therefore, we argue that the engaged gamer is to be considered as both internal and external stakeholder. As illustrated by *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* case, the co-creation behaviour of the engaged gamer Maeyanie effectively led to a changed positioning of the game, thereby affecting lifetime sales. Consequently, her direct influence on the game effectively makes her a co-creator. Therefore, she should be regarded as both an external stakeholder in her role as consumer, as well as an internal stakeholder in her role as co-creator. When engaged gamers' direct influence becomes large enough to set the pattern for future events, they can be seen as internal stakeholders. However, rooted their role as consumers, they also constitute external stakeholders.

Building on Roper and Fill (2012), who argue that the better the mutual understanding is between all stakeholders, reputation will develop and the desired positioning reached. Hence, as it is evident that the engaged gamers already consider themselves co-creators of video games, communication needs to mirror this by addressing them as both internal and external stakeholders. Brand management should align the internal as well as external stakeholders through improved communication. This became evident in several of the interviews conducted, where game companies are perceived to tailor their games to the requirements of engaged gamers. The cosplayer Madeleine states:

I would say BioWare who makes the Mass Effect and Dragon Age games, which I cosplay from as well. [...] when they make their designs for the new games, they actually think about cosplayers. Like - Ok, we're going to add a bag here because cosplayers need bags - Like, where do I put my stuff?

The indie game developer Bernd goes even further, clearly indicating that gamers also need to be regarded as internal stakeholders by stating that: “[...] the community [is] even overtaking



some parts of the development since the developer starts to listen to the community and they need to come back and forth there.”

The need for companies to understand engaged gamers as internal stakeholders is similarly manifested in the frustration displayed by interviewees who felt their engagement behaviours were being ignored. Freddy was most evident when he articulated that “[...] at a certain point the company will start treating every player as a wallet”, indicating that he wants to be appreciated as more than a mere consumer, an external stakeholder commodified through the company. Karlos had the same sentiment, stating “Oh, it’s a cash cow!”, referring to gamers as perceived by companies. The same is true for John, who stated that “I’m not sure they even care [...] They care about the sales charts [...] I’m just an ant to them”, referring to large publishers. Their reflections emphasise the poor reputation companies like Electronic Arts endure due to their ignorant stance perceived by their consumers.

Hence, companies that view the engaged gamers solely as consumers, or external stakeholders, suffer from negative reputational consequences and exacerbate their relations to engaged gamers. Consequently, the strategic brand management needs to adjust by considering engaged gamers as internal and external stakeholders. This allows them to manage them as such, enabling a reconciliation with their engaged gamers.

Moreover, Davies and Chun (2002) point out that internal stakeholders such as employees are more likely to spread their positive view on to external stakeholders if they have a positive perception of the respective brand. Aligned with the co-creational power engaged gamers possess, we argue that their position can be partly seen as employee-alike, thus making them possible brand advocates. Consequently, satisfying engaged gamers is of paramount importance. Furthermore, it provides the strategic opportunity to foster positive engagement behaviours while at the same time reducing the likelihood of negative engagement behaviours. Hence, we argue that engaged gamers need to be considered both internal and external stakeholders.

This relates to the widely shared argument that the power of consumers is ever-increasing (Christodoulides 2009). Through participatory practices (cf. Jenkins 2006) of new, ever-moving consumer tribes (Maffesoli 1996, Cova *et al.* 2011) or communities (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001), the consumer is able to affect brands in several ways. They profit from the diminishing barriers between companies and consumers (Jaakkola and Alexander 2014) and can act as plunderers, entrepreneurs, double agents or activators (Cova *et al.* 2011). Similar to the vanishing barriers



between company and consumers, Castranova (2008) argues that Huizinga's (1938) magic circle, the membrane between the real world and the game, is fading, creating an ever-moving state of flow between game and reality, consumer and company. Accordingly, the clear differentiation between internal and external stakeholders can be seen as increasingly challenging, if not outdated.

### 7.3. Brand Impact of Gamer Engagement

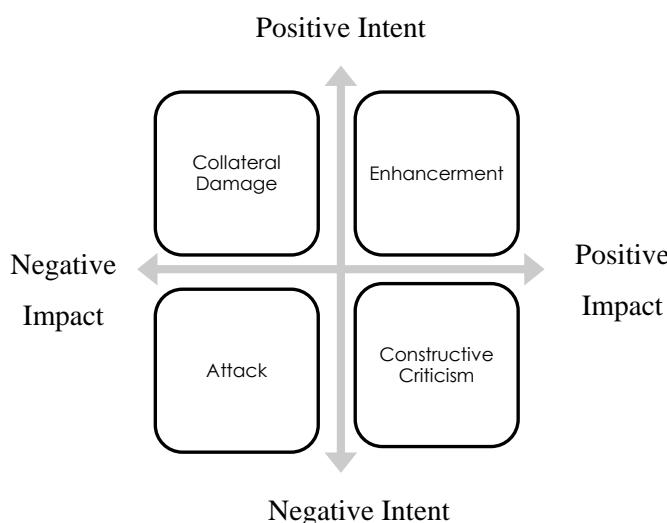


Figure 8: Brand Impact of Gamer Engagement

opportunities, thus indicating a conceptual closeness to the classic SWOT model. Its similarity is primarily found in its strategic orientation, allowing to assess engagement behaviours and their impact systematically, to adapt the brand management accordingly. However, in contrast to the SWOT, each domain includes an internal and an external perspective due to our finding that engaged gamers can be regarded as both internal and external stakeholders. Furthermore, this model features axes, allowing to situate engagement behaviours on a continuum in regard to brand impact and intent. The top two domains based on positive intent consist of what we term *brand supporters*, whereas gamers engaging in the two domains rooted in negative intent are termed *brand defectors*.

The first quadrant corresponds with gamers' engagement of positive intent that results in a negative outcome. We refer to this as *collateral damage*; damage to the brand that was unintended by the engaged gamer. From a strategic perspective, it can be regarded as a weakness, since a company fails to channel engagement behaviours to create positive outcomes from brand supporters' engagement behaviours.

In this section we suggest a model showing the impact engaged gamers have on brands in the video game industry. We term its different domains *collateral damage*, *enhancement*, *attack* and *constructive criticism*, reflecting the impact each form of engagement has on the brand. From a strategic perspective, these can also be regarded as weaknesses, strengths, threats and



One occurrence of *collateral damage* was found in the case of *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*, where the modification was created with a positive intent: Maeyanie, the gamer who created the modification, openly stated her support for the game series. However, the brand identity of the game was initially damaged, forcing the publisher to abide by the ESRB's decision to re-rate the game as M. Subsequently, the title's positioning and reputation also suffered due to the engagement, leading corporate communication to adapt to address the issue (cf. chapter 6.2). Maeyanie later stated her regret for any harm done to Bethesda, the developer and publisher behind the game (McInnes 2006). Hence, the company was in a situation where the gamer's engagement was rooted in positive intentions, but resulted in a negative outcome - collateral damage to brand.

The second quadrant is termed *enhancement* and reflects engagement based on positive intent resulting in a positive brand impact. On a strategic level, these engaged gamers constitute a strength, as they enhance the brand through their engagement behaviours. It also reflects added value gamers create through their engagement (Jeppesen 2004, Postigo 2007, 2010, Sotamaa 2010).

Building on *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* example, one can definitely identify modding as enhancement: More than 25,000 modifications are downloaded daily from just one website (nexusmods 2016) ten years after the game was released. This shows that even though the immediate impact on reputation of Maeyanie's modification was negative, the response from publisher Bethesda mitigated the negative impact in the long run. Through the official *TES Construction Set*, Bethesda established their support for modifications created by engaged gamers (Bethesda Softworks LLC 2014), highlighting the advantage of fostering and channelling engagement.

Consequentially, it can be argued that a company's reaction to engagement behaviours can reduce the damage to the brand and even use them to their advantage. This is also reflected in the *SimCity* case, where developer Maxis had, and still has an active modding community for the previously released *SimCity 4*, but decided against supporting modifications from the start (Simtropolis 2016) for *SimCity*. As gamers emphasised, *SimCity 4*'s modifications largely enhanced the game, also affecting its brand identity and reputation.

Another example of enhancement can be found in cosplay, a social engagement behaviour supporting the creation of community. The following discussion between three cosplayers emphasises this:



Madeleine: I think more and more, they [companies, A/N] start to realise that it's actually a good marketing point. Because people get into it. Like I've never played League of Legends, I don't care about it, but I know half of their heroes, because of cosplay.

Elsa: It can only be good for them to use it because we do our own costumes, we do everything ourselves, they don't have to pay for anything. We do it because we love it. And we love the characters of the game.

Susan: And everyone loves cosplayers! Cosplayers love cosplayers and non-cosplayers loves us too! Especially if they cosplay a character that you love. Cosplay is just awesome for all reasons!

They highlight the enhancing function of cosplay, an insight that is supported by Jens, the public relations manager at Copenhagen Games, stating that “cosplay is on the rise, tremendously” and referring to it as one of the most popular and requested activities besides playing.

The third quadrant is termed *attack*, since the intent is to harm the brand. From a strategic perspective, this represents the most dangerous domain of gamers’ engagement, as it can be regarded as a direct threat to the brand. Gamers engaging in this kind of behaviour do so deliberately – calling for immediate and appropriate response from brand management.

The launch of *SimCity* reflects this, as the frustration of the engaged gamers finally led to them engaging in influencing behaviour. They began creating videos, podcasts and posting on forums, talking about how the game was destroyed by the developing studio, Maxis, and its corporate mother and publisher, EA. The brand impact can be illustrated by frustrated gamers, stating for example that “it feels like a slap in the fans’ faces from EAxis” (Exe19) or that “they [Maxis, A/N] have officially been EA-fied” (Å§haÅ--Ñ€Å\$hÅŽo [user name, A/N]), referring to the bad reputation of Electronic Arts in 2013 (cf. Chapter 6.1).

The failed launch of *SimCity* led to more engaged gamers attacking the brand, finally resulting in the damage of EA’s brand even further after the company was voted worst company in America for the second consecutive time. This emphasises the threat engaged gamers can pose through their attacks. Before, during and even after the launch of *SimCity*, the companies behind the game stood firm in defending the corporate choices contested by the player base and, thus, failed to recognise gamers’ complaints and turn it into what we term *constructive criticism*, the last quadrant. This refers to ill-intended engagement where a company successfully uses potentially harmful engagement to affect the brand in a positive way. This potential was highlighted throughout the interviews, as several interviewees pointed out how the use of complaints to improve a game enhanced their opinion about a company or game. Lari



emphasised this outcome of constructive criticism by stating that Valve<sup>12</sup> “got so many complaints that they nerfed<sup>13</sup> it the next day” and points out that “Valve is a lot better at taking care of their customers.” Consequentially, we argue, that complaints and other negative forms of engagement can be regarded as opportunities, since they have the potential to increase a brand’s reputation through appropriate interaction with engaged gamers.

Concurring with Keller (2009, 2013, p. 121), we argue that engagement is indeed an “affirmation of brand loyalty” and can be regarded as one objective of brand building. However, Keller’s notion of active engagement is neglecting the potentially negative consequences of gamers’ engagement – both the two case studies and the interviews conducted emphasised that consumer engagement also feature negative effects. Consequently, we reflect Hollebeek and Chen (2014) view on negative dimensions of consumer engagement, and point out that companies should aim at generating enhancing engagement behaviours through their activities.

As emphasised in brand management literature (e.g. Kapferer 2012, Roper and Fill 2012), aligning brand identity with communication creates more distinct and believable brands. According to our research, it also helps to prevent companies from triggering negatively intended behaviours: A continuous and consistent communication that is aligned with the brand’s identity creates authenticity (Balmer and Greyser 2009), which precludes frustration rooted in brand identity tensions from occurring. Subsequently, it also reduces attacking engagement, especially of the influencing type, as it removes the object of discontent. Besides its political dimension (cf. Chapter 6.1, gamers’ influencing engagement behaviours signalled one essential, underlying reason: Maxis and EA’s introduction of an always-online feature and requirement shattered on SimCity’s identity as single player game, established since 1989. Therefore, we argue, the new feature was irreconcilable with the game’s historic identity that can be seen as part of its brand essence (Balmer and Greyser 2009) and engendered gamers’ attacking engagement.

However, new features and changes occur, and are necessary, to develop sequels to existing games. To prevent this from causing *attacks*, communication needs to successfully transport the changes and link them to the existing identity. The company needs to protect the brand by

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<sup>12</sup> Valve is a well-known developer and publisher, notably for its games *Half-Life* and *Counter Strike* and for running the video game distribution platform *Steam*.

<sup>13</sup> Nerfing refers to a game company reducing the strength of an in-game item, often due to its reputation of being too strong in comparison to other in-game items.



attempting to transform *collateral damage* into *enhancement* and mitigate *attacks* by utilising it as *constructive feedback* to improve the game to achieve a positive outcome. Furthermore, it also implies that the brand's identity needs to be able to support future changes. This emphasises the paramount importance attributed to brand identity creation, as it becomes an essential element of the game development process and needs to be addressed early on. Accordingly, appropriate models are required to create a suitable identity and to assure brand fit (Wuts *et al.* 2012). Current transformations and the shift towards a more service-centred industry (Lane 2012, Electronic Arts 2013a, Activision Blizzard 2016) underline the importance of an integrated brand management even further, since service brands are highly dependent of their reputation (Roper and Fill 2012). In virtue of the essential role the brand's identity plays, we argue that managing engagement in the video game industry occurs first and foremost through brand management.

Despite focusing first on prevention, brand defectors always exist, as no one game can fulfil every gamers' expectations – a fact that gamers are aware of and that was mentioned several times. Nonetheless, in our study gamers consistently emphasised that being recognised and being taken seriously is essential, indicating a lack of appropriate interactions and appreciation by companies throughout the production process and lifecycle. Accordingly, we argue that heeding this advice constitutes a first step to counter possible *attacks*, thus reducing threats for a video game brand. Further actions to address *attacks* and *collateral damage* should be based on the motivations behind the gamers' engagements (cf. Table 8), enabling the company to understand engagement behaviours and employ the appropriate crisis management strategies (e.g. Balmer and Greyser 2009, Roper and Fill 2012).



## 7.4.The Brand Building and Engagement Wheel

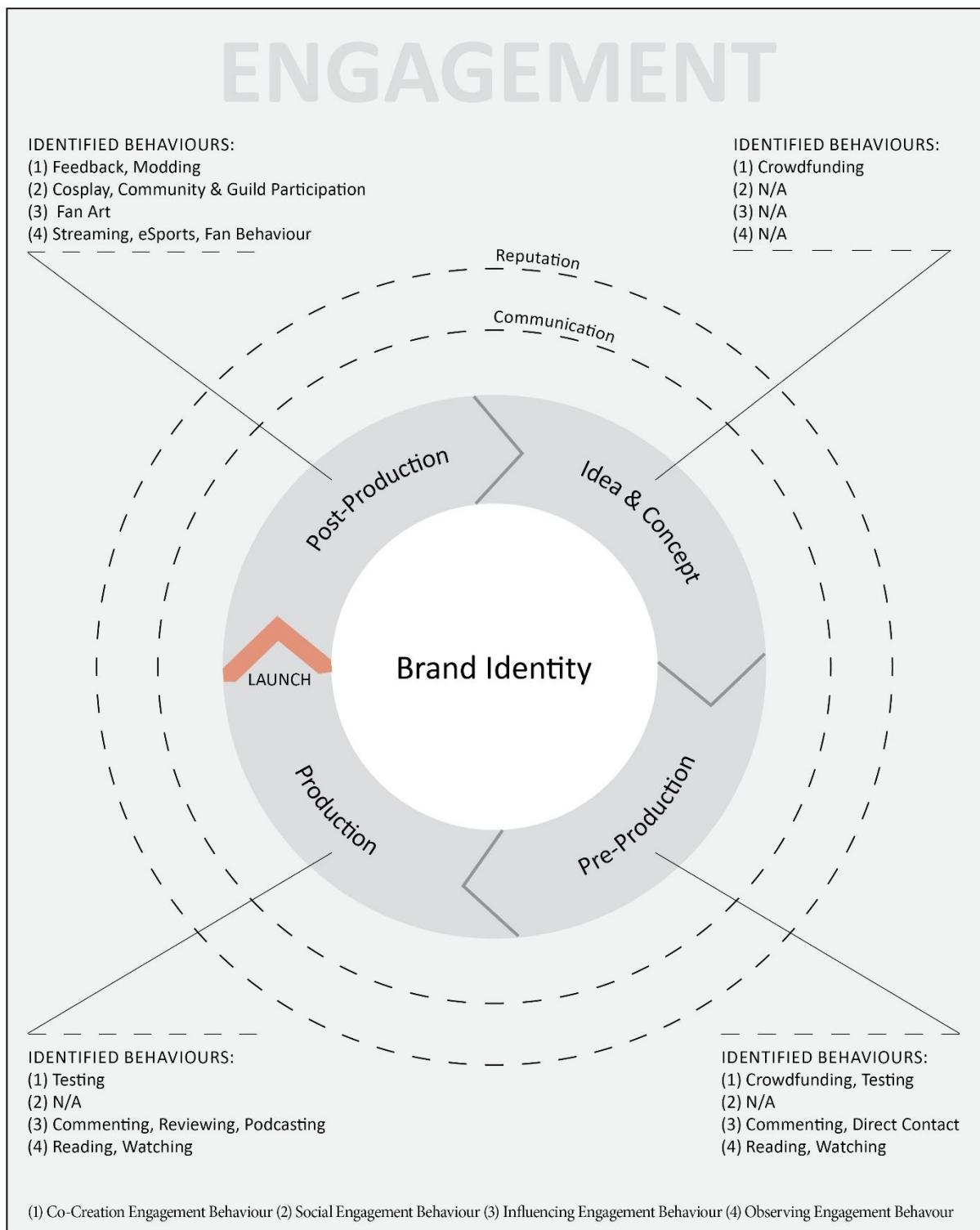


Figure 9: Brand Building and Engagement Wheel, combined with types of engagement

In the previously introduced integrated brand building model (cf. Figure 5), we argued that the identity of a video game needs to be designed early on in the production process, enabling the game to arrive at the intended positioning through the alignment with its identity.



However, as elaborated in the industry background, the industry is transforming: Publishers concentrate on fewer products, and therefore brands (Electronic Arts 2013a, Activision Blizzard 2016), while at the same time more services and offers extending the central brand throughout the year are introduced to generate additional revenue by tapping new revenue sources through services and offers (Lane 2012, Electronic Arts 2013a). Furthermore, sequels are essential, as they enable companies to exploit established brands and mitigate the risks related to developing triple-A titles.

Due to this transformation, an integrated strategic brand management accompanying the production, lifecycle and brand extensions over time becomes paramount. The SimCity case highlighted that the release of *SimCity* was largely affected by co-creation engagement behaviours for its prequel *SimCity 4*, shaping consumers' expectations towards the newest iteration. However, the previously introduced integrated brand building model was not able to capture this influence, as it is understanding the video game production as a linear process, that is accompanied by a simultaneous brand building process. Hence, a model capturing the impact of engaged gamers on established brands needed to reflect previous titles.

Consequentially, we propose to see this process as a continuous cycle that represents the brand building and management of existing brands over time. The industry's transformation leads towards more service-based brands (Lane 2012), making reputation and its protection crucial (Roper and Fill 2012). Since reputation is largely created by consumers (Roper and Fill 2012), and consumers' perceptions are partly shaped by corporate communication (Roper and Fill 2012), we introduce both communication and reputation to the model. Accordingly, the identity of a brand needs to be consistently and continuously communicated throughout the production process. This assures a fit between the internally defined identity and the perception of consumers and avoids diluting or damaging the brand. Consequentially, the development of additional content (e.g. DLCs, Add-ons) for a game, sequels or extensions needs to reflect the brand identity not only in the development itself, but also in communications.

Despite the importance of corporate communications, one essential aspect of our proposed model is the perspective of regarding engaged gamers and their engagement behaviours as part of the brand building and management process. Their engagement is not considered as an extraneous bonus, but as an essential element of successful video game brands. In fact, we argue that the strategic brand management in the video game industry is embedded in gamers'



engagement. Their behaviours determine the context and atmosphere in which corporate communication occurs, thus affecting its effectivity.

Moreover, the model recognises engagement behaviours as co-creative: Gamers' engagement behaviours have the potential to affect the brand on any level in any phase of the process. Through their behaviour, they form a brand's reputation, influence the communication and, hence, constantly re-negotiate the brand identity. Their behaviour also forms the expectations and perceptions consumers have towards the sequel or extension of the brand, thus affecting the positioning: As the cases have shown, previous engagement alters consumers perceived positioning and the actual positioning, thereby also defining the achievable indented positioning (Fuchs and Diamantopoulos 2010).

We present this model as applicable when modifying communication along the phases of the production process and lifecycle of a video game, to align with the appropriate engagement behaviour. It also illustrates that gamer engagement takes place in all phases, with continuous influence to the brand's identity, communication and reputation spanning the entire model. This further strengthens the argument for video game companies to strategically manage their engaged gamers.

In the following sections, we elucidate the different types of gamer engagement behaviours identified throughout our study, as they occur for the first time in the four (4) production phases, highlighting their impact on the three (3) essential dimensions of strategic brand management, identity, communication and reputation. Thereby we highlight the possible outcomes of engaged gamers' behaviours and enable the integration into the strategic brand management process.

#### 7.4.1. Idea and Concept phase

In the initial phase of the video game production process we argue that co-creation engagement behaviours occur in the form of crowdfunding. Developers can fund the game through crowdfunding, pitching it on websites such as Kickstarter or fig.com, effectively making engaged gamers investors and part of the brand creation process. It affects the three (3) levels of strategic brand management as follows:

**Identity:** When gamers influence in the first phase of the production process, they shape the actual identity of the brand. As argued previously, identity should be defined early in the process and be based a long-term strategic perspective for potential sequels and additional



services. As investors, their position on the internal-external stakeholder continuum is clearly moved into the direction of internal stakeholders.

**Communication:** Backers<sup>14</sup> expect continuous information and updates regarding their investment. They, conversely, provide direct feedback and suggestions to the developer. Communication therefore needs to address these issues and suggestions to involve their engaged gamers into the process.

**Reputation:** As vested stakeholders, backers of games have an interest to provide a positive image of the brand to consumers. As pointed out beforehand, as partly internal stakeholders they are more likely to become advocates of a brand and therefore enhance its reputation (Roper and Fill 2012). Therefore, their engagement indirectly leads to the creation of advocates and an improved reputation.

#### 7.4.2. Pre-Production phase

In the second phase of the production process, new gamer engagement behaviours are observable. The official communication from the publisher begins, providing information to potential consumers. Hence, this is where gamers start commenting publicly on the development of the game, identified as influencing behaviours. Observing behaviours displayed in pre-production are watching videos and reading release information from developers to follow the development progress. Its consequences are as follows:

**Identity:** As external brand communication commences, reactions from engaged gamers enable brand management or developers to gain insights into consumers' perception of the brand, thereby allowing them to make adjustments to the brand's identity.

**Communication:** Engaged gamers will influence others through their behaviour, a fact that needs to be monitored and eventually addressed through corporate communication. Gamers' engagement can also serve as an indicator whether corporate communication is aligned with consumers' brand perception or not.

**Reputation:** Engaged gamers supervise the development of the project and influence the reputation of the game and its brand through their communication with other people. As more observing behaviour begins, the weight of the gamers' engagement on reputation increases.

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<sup>14</sup> People financing crowdfunding projects are usually referred to as 'backers'.

#### 7.4.3. Production phase

Co-creation engagement behaviours in the form of alpha and beta testing of the game take place, allowing the developers to observe gamers' reactions to the game. Active engaged gamers in this phase begin to create podcasts, write articles and comment on forums and company websites as influencing engagement behaviours. Similar to the observing engagement behaviours first displayed in the pre-production phase, this phase includes watching videos and following websites that report on the development of the game. This affects the strategic brand managements accordingly:

**Identity:** The identity of the game becomes more and more visible, allowing engaged gamers to react to it. This phase can therefore reveal if the created identity is accepted by the audience and uncover potential problems related to the intended positioning of the brand. Furthermore, testing allows further insights into gamers' acceptance of the brand.

**Communication:** The closer the launch day, the more critical corporate communication becomes: It consequently needs to address concerns voiced by engaged gamers through their influencing behaviours and monitor closely potential influencers.

**Reputation:** If the company has not paid attention to the engaged gamers' sentiments, the reputation of the brand can be severely harmed even before launch date, therefore also directly affecting sales.

#### 7.4.4. Post-Production phase

The last phase of the production process in the creation of video game brands, the co-creation engagement behaviours take the shape of both direct and indirect feedback such as bug reports sent by actual players of the game. This is also where engaged gamers start creating and sharing modifications for the game. As the case studies have shown, these can extend the lifetime of a game past the release of its sequel.

Moreover, social engagement behaviours take off as engaged gamers create communities and guilds in which they participate and create a sense of belonging. However, these behaviours are by no means limited to online communities, but also occur offline. Cosplayers dress up as their favourite characters from the game in social contexts. Fan art and other forms of expressive interaction with the game commence, being shared both privately and publicly as influencing behaviours, shaping consumers' perception of the game world and its respective brand. For some games, the eSports scene becomes relevant, creating new observing engagement



behaviours where fans can stream videos of their favourite teams or players. Other observing engagement behaviours include watching other people play games, sometimes creating online superstars, most famously the most followed person on YouTube, PewDiePie (Parker 2016).

**Identity:** The brand identity in this phase can be affected by all types of gamer engagement behaviours: Consumers interact constantly with the brand through social, co-creation, influencing and observing behaviours, making it necessary to constantly communicate with them. Their engagement is embedded in an ongoing renegotiation process that has the ability to shape the brand identity.

**Communication:** Communication in this phase includes all advertising and PR. Engaged gamers through their behaviours create their own communication, not necessarily aligning with the company's. As the identity is in a constant renegotiation process, communications need to assure that the changing identity is aligned with the reputation. It also needs to address potential negative engagement behaviours, to prevent damage from the brand.

**Reputation:** As highlighted previously, video game brands are mostly service-based and therefore prone to take serious damage through reputational issues. Social engagement and co-creation engagement behaviours can support the reputation, therefore indicating the need to foster them through official support. Influencing behaviours increase the reach and, if for example influential streamers or YouTubers are involved, have the potential to spread a positive reputation to a wider audience.

## 7.5.Long-Term Consequences of Gamer Engagement

The SimCity case enabled us to provide insight into the long-term consequences of engaged gamers for strategic brand management: As briefly pointed out, the previous title in the game series, SimCity 4, enjoyed an almost reverential reputation. However, this was not due to a perfect game released by its publisher EA and its developer Maxis, but was linked by several comments analysed in the case study to co-creation engagement behaviours. Dijego, a user on the forum Simtropolis.com, summarised it by stating that “SimCity 4 was pretty bald without the awesome mods that were added on later [and] [...] made it live at least a decade longer”.

Linking these co-creational engagement behaviours to the Brand Building and Engagement Wheel (cf. Figure 9) highlights that the engagement occurred mainly in the post-production phase of SimCity 4. While gamers' engagement was aiming at extending and co-creating *SimCity 4*, it nonetheless affected the sequel, *SimCity*. Besides the identity problems *SimCity 4*



was facing, gamers emphasised that the lacking moddability<sup>15</sup> indicated by the always-online requirement rendered the newest sequel unattractive. Therefore, the engagement behaviours attributed to *SimCity 4* also affected its sequel that appeared a decade later. Consequentially, we argue that managing engagement is paramount in the video game industry, as it has the potential to damage or enhance established and valuable brands in a long-term perspective or even permanently.

In the light of the ongoing transformation of the video game industry and its increasing focus on building brands to exploit them over time (Lane 2012, Electronic Arts 2013a, Stuart 2016), monitoring and managing engagement becomes an essential element of the industry's strategy. Thus, it needs to be integrated into its production, brand-building and management processes to preclude engaged gamers from damaging the brand and to foster positive engagement. Besides the implications for strategic brand management, the negative impact of gamers' engagement needs also be reflected in brand-building theory. Concurring with Hollebeek and Chen (2014), we highlight the potential of negative consequences and therefore argue that its definition as an objective of brand building (Keller 2009, 2013) needs to be critically revised.

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<sup>15</sup> Moddability describes how easily games are modifiable, referring to the creation of consumer modification (user-generated content) for video games.



## 8. Conclusion

*This chapter summarises the key findings of our research, relates them to the study's purpose of investigating the phenomenon of the engaged gamers and answers our research questions. Furthermore, we present the theoretical contributions our paper makes to the field of strategic brand management and engagement theory, as well as the managerial implications that arise from gamers' engagement. We also point out limitations and fields of interest for further research.*

This study set out to determine how and why gamers engage with brands beyond purchase and consumption, and how they affect the strategic brand management in the video game industry.

We found that engaged gamers' motivations are rooted within four (4) central dimensions, covering social, immersive, achievement-related reasons as well as frustration. While the former three (3) were defined in earlier studies, frustration emerged as an additional motivational dimension. We further demonstrated that these motivations are the drivers for four (4) distinct types of engagement behaviours, all of which require the use of resources such as energy, time or money. The discerned types include co-creation engagement behaviours, social engagement behaviours, influencing engagement behaviours and observing engagement behaviours. They all relate to the brand or video game as focal object and are linked to gamers' intentions, elucidating on the 'how' and 'why' engagement beyond purchase and consumptions occurs.

Furthermore, our investigation has also shown that gamers' engagement is affected by the industry background: In part due to the transformation from goods to services, video game ownership is contested. Video game piracy further exacerbates the issue, as companies try to protect their games through aggressive digital rights measures. In the light of this background, we were able to demonstrate that parts of the interaction between gamers and industry display belligerent features and are part of the frustration experienced by gamers.

In regard to the second aim of our study, exploring how engaged gamers affect the strategic brand management in the video game industry, one major finding was that their engagement affects several dimensions: Identity, communication, reputation and positioning. Through their different types of engagement, gamers constantly interact with the brand, re-negotiating the



brand identity, enforcing adjustments to communication and affecting reputation and positioning. Consequently, they are essential actors in the industry's brand building process.

However, our study also revealed that their engagement is by no means always of a positive nature. Rooted in the previously identified motivation of frustration, engaged gamers are able to severely damage a brand, affecting dimensions such as positioning, reputation and even identity. On the other hand, engaged gamers also enhance video game brands by adding to it through co-creation and the creation of social groups, by propagating the brand through different influencing channels or by immersing deeper into the respective brand experience.

Accordingly, corporate communication in the video game industry needs to reflect gamers' engagement behaviours persistently, not only in crisis situations, as it occurs continuously throughout the brand building process. This represents another major finding of our study, calling for an ongoing monitoring of engagement within the industry's strategic brand management and highlighting the importance of continuous corporate communication to assure congruency with its identity.

### 8.1.Theoretical Contributions

Our investigation of the phenomenon of the engaged gamer emphasised the fact that active engagement can occur spontaneously and without a planned brand-building process within the gaming industry. This represents a large potential that is insufficiently accounted for by many companies nowadays. We demonstrated the impact of different types of engagement on brand identity, reputation, communication and positioning based on intent. We divided engaged gamers in two groups consisting of brand supporters whose intentions are positive, enhancing the brand or causing collateral damage, and brand defectors with malicious intentions, attacking the brand and providing possible constructive criticism. Based on these dimensions, we created the *Brand Impact of Gamer Engagement* model, contributing to the field of brand management by allowing the strategic assessment of engagement behaviours in relation to their impact on video game brands.

Another major contribution of our study is the *Brand Building and Engagement Wheel*, as it bridges the research gap between strategic brand management and the engagement concept. It highlights that both the brand and the industry's production processes are embedded in engagement behaviours occurring continuously beyond purchase and consumption. It demonstrates that a clearly defined identity is indispensable for a successful strategic brand management in the video game industry, as the continuous interaction with engaged gamers



persistently influences brand dimensions such as identity, communication, reputation and positioning.

Furthermore, our study investigated engagement behaviours and demonstrated that engagement can also occur in negative forms and influence a brand's reputation and positioning in ways not prevised by the company. However, current brand building models mostly see engagement as positive, or even as an objective of brand building. Therefore, this study adds to the literature by highlighting the need to better integrate negative forms of engagement within brand building models.

A further theoretical contribution arises from the field of motivation: Our study demonstrated that in-game motivational dimensions also fit motivations of engagement beyond purchase and consumption, mooting the question whether in-game motivations transpire to active engagement. Furthermore, we identified frustration as an essential motivation for negatively intended forms of motivation.

## 8.2. Managerial Implications

Our study clearly revealed the strategic importance of engaged gamers for the video game industry, as their engagement behaviours affect industry's processes throughout the complete lifecycle of a game and have the potential to affect both the product and the corporate brand on the short and long term. The proposed *Brand Impact of Gamer Engagement* model can be used to visualise the strategic implications of the engaged gamer by positioning their behaviours, highlighting whether they can be regarded as strengths, weaknesses, opportunities or threats. In countering brand defectors and channelling brand supporters, engagement can be used to strengthen a brand. The management of engagement in gamers should consequently be an integral part of the strategic brand management in the video game industry.

Another managerial implication based on our investigations is the importance of defining the brand identity early in the process of brand building and video game production. The brand needs to be designed to last, yet flexible enough for alterations introduced through sequels and other brand-related offers. Furthermore, it also revealed that communication needs to be aligned with the identity, as otherwise confusion arises when engagement behaviours emerge.

A third implication emerges from the *Brand Building and Engagement Wheel* that enables companies to situate the relevant and visible types of active engagement along their processes, allowing them to better understand how and when the engaged gamers can affect the reputation,



communication and identity of a brand. It implies the strategic integration of gamers' engagement behaviours into the different production phases to capitalise on gamers' positive engagement and to mitigate potential threats from brand defectors.

To systematically integrate gamers' engagement behaviours into the strategic brand management, we propose to first assess the potential impact of engagement by using the *Brand Impact of Gamer Engagement*. Subsequently, utilising the *Brand Management and Engagement Wheel*, it is possible to situate it in the brand building process before finally identifying its engagement type and underlying motivation through the proposed typology (cf. Table 8).

Another implication demonstrated requires management to treat engaged gamers as both external and internal stakeholders, co-creating the brand as employee-like actors. Frustration was found to ensue when ignoring engaged gamers, who perceive themselves as co-creators of video games and, consequently, often refer to themselves as internal stakeholders. Therefore, in the light of increasing consumer power and fading lines between companies and consumers, the strategic brand management needs to address them through appreciative communication to foster positive engagement behaviours.

The elucidation of the video game industry and its business models is in itself a contribution of this study. The obstacles, including rising costs, video game piracy, changing distribution chains due to the digitalisation and the ongoing transformation towards a service-based industry, found to be disrupting the future of the entire industry and the way its companies monetise their products and services should be taken into account by brand managers in planning forthcoming brand iterations.

### 8.3. Limitations and Further Research

Our study is focused on consumer insights and, therefore, analyses the consequences for the strategic brand management mainly from a consumer perspective. Accordingly, further research is needed to confirm that industry executives share the point of view proposed in our study.

Another implication for future research concerns motivational dimensions – as we confirmed that several motivations for playing the game also occur when gamers engage beyond their consumption. This calls for further research on how in-game motivation and motivation for



engagement behaviours are intertwined, and if in-game motivation could be affected by motivations occurring in engagement beyond purchase and consumption.

One aspect limited by the scope of our research concerns the relation between corporate brands and their respective game brands: In both cases illustrated in this research, the corporate brand is recognised by gamers, therefore affecting the video game brand. Consequently, we identify the interplay between different levels of corporate brands, the video game brands and engaged gamers as one essential field for further research.

The types of engagement behaviours may change in nature as the brand building and engagement wheel keeps turning. For future research, possibly changing behaviours and their specific effects on the brand building process could provide valuable insights.



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