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Value Co-Creation: Multiplayer

Identifying the Mechanisms of Value Co-creation within the Gaming Industry

by

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Abstract

This study is an initial attempt to investigate value co-creation in the gaming industry by looking at Value Co-Creation through a framework called The Value Co-Creation Egg. The aim of the framework was to identify the mechanisms of *The Consumer* and *The Company*, which ultimately led for a deeper understanding of how these actors operate within the context of *The Market*. To understand *The Consumer*, it was essential to understand how online gaming communities co-create value. Subsequently, to understand *The Company*, it was necessary to understand how gaming companies facilitate value co-creation.

Data for this research was collected by conducting a netnographic study on online gaming communities of four different games; (i) Fornite (ii) World of Warcraft (iii) EVE Online and (iv) Playerunknown's Battleground, across three different online platforms; (i) Official forums (ii) Official Facebook pages and (iii) Third-party forums. A total of 248 posts were gathered and 3337 comments were observed, over a period of 10 weeks. Subsequently, this data was categorised per the actors of The Value Co-Creation Egg: *The Consumer* and *The Company*.

The results of this research show that the mechanisms of *The Consumer* were identified to be helping each other and sharing expertise and knowledge. While those of *The Company* were, the incorporation of player feedback, the encouragement and recognition of UGC and the creation of dedicated forums and sub-forums. The identification of these mechanisms led to an analysis of how they affected *The Market*. The analysis shows that (i) dialogue and (ii) User-generated Content were the most dominant patterns identified within *The Market*. Furthermore, it revealed that these two were interconnected and very much reliant on one another.

Keywords: Value Co-Creation, Gaming industry, User Generated Content, The Value Co-Creation Egg, Online gaming communities

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1 Introduction

In this chapter, the reader is introduced to the rise of the gaming industry, consumer empowerment, online gaming communities and more importantly to the phenomenon of value co-creation. Furthermore, aim and objective, the research questions and research contributions are presented.

1.1 The Gaming Industry

The gaming industry has arguably been seen as one of the most rapidly developing markets of the past century. While gaming used to be done by a small minority, today, with a reported 2.2 billion people engaging in gaming, the gaming industry has shifted from being a niche part-time activity to an activity that has become part of many people's daily lives (Newzoo, 2017). In fact, the gaming industry is one of the fastest growing forms of entertainment and as such has already surpassed both the music and film industries in terms of revenue, with video games being considered to have better value for money than other forms of entertainment (Desjardins, 2017; Unterman, 2017). For the purpose of this study, gaming refers to the act of playing electronic games, produced by gaming companies, through the use of various electronic devices such as consoles and computers.

Although the gaming industry is growing rapidly, it has had its fair share of issues. One example is the video game crash of 1983 which almost completely obliterated the sector (Chikhani, 2015). While the industry was able to recover by itself, it was not until LAN networks and sometime later the internet, that multiplayer gaming become popular. This development proved to be a genuine revolution within the gaming industry and eventually making it the industry it is today (Chikhani, 2015). The internet now allows users to connect and interact from different computers, which vastly improved the social aspect of gaming and eventually led to the creation of true multiplayer experiences such as World of Warcraft, Counter-Strike, StarCraft and League of Legends (Chikhani, 2015).

Besides enabling multiplayer and social interactions between gamers, the internet brought revolution to the way business was conducted as a whole. Two decades ago scholars predicted that the internet was going to disrupt the settled practices of marketing and that power would start to shift from companies towards consumers (Alba, Lynch, Weitz, Janiszewski, Lutz & Sawyer, 1997; Bakos, 1991; Deighton & Glazer, 1997; Deighton & Kornfeld, 2009; Kozinets, 1999). Thus, it would suggest entirely new relationships between companies and consumers would form. At first, it was said the internet would enable powerful, inexpensive and very intrusive forms of direct marketing (Deighton & Kornfeld, 2009). While practices such as direct mail and telemarketing already existed the growth of the internet was said to turn this from a messy action-reaction sequence into a sequence as fluid and intimate as a regular conversation (Deighton & Kornfeld, 2009). As Deighton and Kornfeld (2009) pointed out, while some of these predictions did come true, "it is about how they were wrong" (p.4). They further argue that the events of the past two decades empowered consumers, instead of giving more power to marketers.

Moreover, the past few decades has also made it effortless for audiences to interact directly with marketers and more importantly with each other (Deighton & Kornfeld, 2009). The development of Web 2.0 and the birth of social media further exemplifies the phenomenon of consumer empowerment. Web 2.0 removed a lot of the restrictions of Web 1.0 and broadened information access and made it easier for users to create and share their own content, which further increased the power of consumers (Labrecque, vor dem Esche, Mathwick, Novak & Hofacker, 2013). The development of Web 2.0 confronted companies with the fact that they were not always welcome in much of the new social media environment, as their messages are seen as "inauthentic, intrusive and out of place" (Fournier & Avery, 2011, p.193).

In relation to the gaming industry, the internet has allowed consumers to access powerful tools. Search engines and public forums enable gamers to gather information, form opinions, discussions and communities before a game is even released. The internet has empowered consumers of video games in such a way that these same consumers now have the power to determine how popular a game is going to be. One example of this is the video game Player Unknown's Battlegrounds (PUBG), while the game was developed by a relatively small team and had virtually no marketing budget, it managed to sell a staggering 15 million copies within one year at a price of 30 US Dollars per copy (Reilly, 2017). This was all due to PUBG's success on various live streaming and various video sharing websites where well-known streamers and

content creators gathered around the game eventually making it one of the most successful video games of the past few years (Hall, 2017). Another even more recent example is the massive success of the game Fortnite, arguably the most popular video game in the world at the point of writing. Similarly, to PUBG, Fortnite was able to capture the gaming communities' attention due to the attention it received from prominent streamers and content creators (Campbell, 2018).

However, while these examples show how online gaming communities can make a game hugely successful, there are just as many examples that show how this power can hinder the success of a video game (Kain, 2017; Kuchera, 2016). For instance, EA games received vast amounts of criticism during the release of the highly anticipated video game: Star Wars; Battlefront II by including pay-to-win style microtransactions into the game (Kain, 2017). Pay-to-win refers to games that include microtransactions that grant power-ups or other in-game items that give players an advantage over other players by purchasing these items with real money. Pay-to-win mechanics create unfair situations as not everyone is willing to spend money on such items or might not be able to pay as much as others. This decision and the backlash that followed ultimately led to EA losing more than 8.5% of its market value (Kain, 2017). Much of this was due to online communities and individual gamers asking others to boycott the game, with a response of EA talking about this issue on the online discussion forum Reddit becoming one of the most disliked posts in the history of the website (Kain, 2017). These are typical examples of how powerful consumers input can be in regard to the success or failure of a company.

The empowerment of consumers brought forth by the rise of the internet, Web 2.0 and the subsequent birth of online communities, has caused co-creation to become a viable means of creating value and improving the success of new products (Füller, Mühlbacher, Matzler & Jawecki, 2009). The previous examples of PUBG and Fortnite show how consumers, through the creation of user-generated content (UGC), have been able to create value for the companies that produced these titles. Which in this example comes in the form of live streams and video content. Arguably to even a greater extent than traditional marketing could ever hope to achieve (Labrecque et al. 2013). This, since the impact of UGC, extends far beyond the virtual context and can even outperform traditional marketing efforts (Labrecque et al. 2013). UGC is a form of electronic word of mouth (eWOM) and as such can bring forth much greater responses. With the impact of such content also said to persist much longer than that of traditional marketing communication making UGC and eWOM in general "gifts that keep on giving" (Trusov,

Bucklin, & Pauwels, 2009, p.96). As such, Holt (2002) also argues that brands can no longer afford to ignore the voices of consumers and that the success of brands (and thus products) has changed to be a collective and co-creative process that involves not only the companies themselves but a wide variety of actors including both individual customers as well as communities.

Co-creation in the gaming industry differs from that in other sectors as the majority of the gaming industry is entirely digital (Newzoo, 2016). The majority of games are being bought and sold online through digital distribution platforms such as Steam, Origin, PlayStation store and even in the Apple and Android stores in the case of mobile devices. With many games also offering multiplayer functionality much gaming is done through the internet and as such it is not too hard to conclude that gaming communities therefore naturally form online first (Gartenberg, 2015; Johnson, 2017). It is because of this that the gaming industry is very well positioned to utilise value co-creation and adapt to the shifting power of consumers to a more considerable extent than, perhaps, most other industries. Both PUBG and Fortnite are examples of how co-creation can be highly successful. By working together with gaming communities such as those found on live streaming websites such as Twitch.tv or video sharing platforms, gaming companies are able to create value with consumers by encouraging the creation of UGC, which in this case come in the form of video content. However, UGC is just one of the many different ways co-creation has taken shape in the gaming industry.

1.2 Aim and Objective

To understand the phenomenon of value co-creation better, in this paper a framework called The Value Co-Creation Egg, which is adapted from Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004), is introduced and will work as a guide to gain a deeper understanding into value co-creation in the gaming industry. The framework will mainly operate on three elements called (i) The Company: which represents how the company facilitates value co-creation (ii) The Consumer: which depicts how the consumers through online gaming communities engage in value co-creation and lastly (iii) The Market: which describes how they collaboratively co-create value together and is further shown in the analysis of the empirical findings.

To gain a better understanding of The Consumer and how value is co-created within the online communities, the researchers framed the first research question to:

RQ 1. How is value co-created within the gaming communities?

Next up, would be to gain deeper insight into The Company and how the companies themselves facilitate value co-creation. To answer this, the second research was formulated:

RQ 2. How do gaming companies facilitate value co-creation?

Lastly, the researchers wanted to unveil how the results of the above-mentioned research questions influence The Market. To answer how The Consumer and The Company collaboratively affect The Market a third research question was formulated:

RQ 3. How do the mechanisms of both actors identify the market?

The research questions are directly linked to the framework of The Value Co-Creation Egg and aim at asking these research questions to develop a deeper understanding of how value is co-created within the gaming industry.

Value co-creation literature has not adequately considered the perspective of the gaming industry, despite its rapid growth and the importance of co-creation within the gaming industry (Castronova, 2005, 2006; Neff, 2005; Newzoo, 2015; Williams, 2006). Moreover, the interactions and relationships between these two actors (consumer and company) have not been fully explored and understood. Although, some authors do mention and discuss the perspective of the gaming industry (Banks & Potts, 2010; Chikhani, 2015; Desjardins, 2017) it has yet to explore the dynamics. Thus, there is a research gap between current literature on value co-creation and how value co-creation is functioning within the multi-billion-dollar gaming industry (Newzoo, 2015). Thus, the thesis is able to contribute with The Value Co-Creation Egg framework that can describe the mechanisms of The Consumer, The Company and The Market by presenting relevant observations that are thematised and analysed in relation to existing literature.

The purpose was also to develop an understanding of how value is co-created (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Vargo, Maglio & Akaka, 2008; Vargo & Morgan, 2005) in the gaming industry by using The Value Co-Creation Egg as a framework to guide the thesis and allow for a deeper understanding of The Consumer, The Company and The Market.

The separation of the research questions is to obtain a holistic understanding of how value is co-created from the different perspectives: (i) online gaming communities (ii) gaming companies (iii) the market. Moreover, the two actors have two separate, but equally important (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004), roles and can therefore not be thoroughly investigated from one research question alone. Thus, research question one and two will be answered by gathering data through observational data, called netnography, as both actors are highly active and communicative in online gaming communities. However, the first research question will focus on understanding how value is co-created in these online gaming communities. Subsequently, while this data will give insights into value co-creation in online gaming communities, it will also help understand how the communities interact with each other. The purpose of the second research question is to identify how gaming companies facilitate value to be co-created and how they interact with their consumers. Lastly, the purpose of the third research question is to link the findings together in a way that can identify how the market works and how it can contribute to existing research on value co-creation.

1.3 Research Contributions

When examining the concept of value co-creation, little literature captivates how value co-creation in the gaming industry is functioning and facilitated. As current literature is, so far, mostly focused on the benefits and how companies need to change the way they think about the consumers (Pongsakornrungsilp & Schroeder, 2011; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Storbacka, Frow, Nenonen & Payne, 2012). Furthermore, current literature, despite scant, mainly focuses on value co-creation in communities rather than online gaming communities with their also being a lack of research on the interactions between companies and consumers in the gaming industry.

This research can identify five key observations that firstly help to understand the mechanisms of The Consumer and The Company, while secondly helping to understand how The Market functions. Thus, the research is able to add to the current literature on value co-creation by giving insights into how value is co-created in online gaming communities, and what role both The Consumer and The Company have. The leading theoretical contributions then become to extend the current literature on value co-creation as presented by multiple authors (Luo, Zhang & Liu, 2015; Lusch & Vargo, 2006; Pongsakornrungsilp & Schroeder, 2011; Prahalad &

Ramaswamy, 2004; Vargo, Maglio & Akaka, 2008). Therefore, The Value Co-Creation Egg purpose is to identify the mechanisms and help understand how value is co-created within the gaming industry.

Having a more in-depth understanding and The Value Co-Creation Egg framework could be a valuable tool for literature to understand the interactions between both actors. Also, it can be of importance for marketers concerning success or failure in the gaming industry, as the paper will give unique insights and advice for marketers who wish to enter the industry or already are operating within it.

1.4 Delimitations

The coverage of this study is focused upon how value is co-created within the gaming industry; thus, the researcher limited the research to only be applicable within that industry. The scope of the thesis is also to provide an understanding of how value is co-created within online multiplayer gaming, although the research could also apply to single player gaming, it is not known to what extent. To understand the dynamics of single player gaming communities, additional research will be required.

This study also does not target any specific age group, as age is difficult to determine in the platforms that were observed. This mostly due to the anonymous nature of many of the platforms but might also be due to people keeping personal information private. Nevertheless, this is of no relevance as the study is more interested in the context rather than the background of the observations. Furthermore, as the researchers have done observations on various platforms, the importance of what is said is more important than its origin; as such, any game that shows any level of value co-creation could have been selected.

As the default language of the internet is English, this paper assumes that the primary language of communication on most online gaming platforms is therefore also in English (Internet World Stats, 2017). Thus, the study does not consider any other language even though the members may have different nationalities. Lastly, it is essential to mention the observations are done of gaming with no financial gain; implying, the observations are not made of professional gamers who have a financial interest.

1.5 Outline of the Thesis

- Chapter 1. In this chapter, the reader is introduced to the rise of the gaming industry, consumer empowerment, online gaming communities and more importantly to the phenomenon of value co-creation. Furthermore, aim and objective, the research questions and research contributions are presented.
- Chapter 2. Following the aim of this study, this chapter is split into relevant headings that will help identify existing theory and knowledge in the fields of (i) value co-creation and (ii) value co-creation in online gaming communities. The chapter will then introduce The Value Co-Creation Egg and explore associated theories and literature.
- Chapter 3. This chapter provides insight into how the thesis utilises an abductive approach to qualitative research with the aim to explore the field. Furthermore, a philosophy of analysis is presented to justify the use of content analysis. The chapter further explains the use of netnography as the data collection and introduces an outline of how the data is analysed.
- Chapter 4. This chapter presents the empirical findings regarding how value is co-created in the communities and how the companies facilitate it. The chapter is divided into three parts; the first part identifies how The Consumer co-create value and the second part identifies how The Company facilitates value co-creation. In the final part the findings are summarised in order to capitalise the dominant patterns.
- Chapter 5. This chapter aims to provide an in-depth analysis and discussion of The Consumer: How do online gaming communities co-create value and The Company: How do gaming companies facilitate value co-creation. Through comparison and linking of the results to these questions, The Market is conceptualised
- Chapter 6. The conclusion chapter summarises the key findings and links them to the study's aim and purpose. Furthermore, it presents the main contributions, points out managerial implications as well as further research directions.

2 Literature/Theoretical Review

Following the aim of this study, this section is split into relevant headings that will help identify existing theory and knowledge in the fields of (i) value co-creation and (ii) value co-creation in online gaming communities. Consequently, the section will then introduce The Value Co-Creation Egg and explore relevant theories and literature on the topics of (iii) The Consumer (iv) The Company and (v) The Market.

2.1 Value Co-Creation

As this thesis is exploring the phenomena of value co-creation in online gaming communities, it is of interest to look at previous studies defining value co-creation from both The Consumer and The Company perspective and researching how these communities co-create value but also investigating how the companies facilitate it. In order to understand value co-creation, it is essential to understand how value is created and what it entails.

The nature of value has been discussed and debated since the Greek philosopher Aristotle. Part of its elusiveness stems from the oblique meanings of value that have been embedded in the foundations of economics and the study of market exchange. Specifically, two general meanings of value, "value-in-exchange" and "value-in-use", reflect different ways of thinking about value and value creation (Vargo, Maglio & Akaka, 2008). The traditional view of value creation is connected to value-in-exchange (Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Vargo & Morgan, 2005). In this traditional view, value is created and manufactured by the company and distributed to the consumer.

The modern view, which the term value co-creation is based upon, is tied to the concept of value-in-use (Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Vargo, Maglio & Akaka, 2008; Vargo & Morgan, 2005). In this concept the roles of consumer and producer are not distinct; thus, value is always co-created by using the product/service. The notion of value co-creation then suggests that: "there is no value until an offering is used - experience and perception are essential to value determination" (Lusch & Vargo, 2006, p. 44). In the gaming industry that means value is not

created before the consumers play the game; that is, value co-creation occurs amongst both actors.

2.1.1 Consumer Empowerment

To further understand what kind of power consumers have gained and how it startled the marketers, it can be categorized into four sources according to Labrecque et al. (2013). These being, the power based on (i) Demand (ii) Information (iii) Network and (iv) Crowd. Of these, Information- and Network-based power are most relevant to understand how it affects the gaming industry based on how relatable they are to online communities (Labrecque et al. 2013).

2.1.1.1 Information-Based Power

As the previous Secretary General of the United Nations Kofi Annan famously said knowledge is power and information is liberating, which is also the case in understanding how increases in access to information among consumers led to consumer empowerment (Christodoulides, 2009; Deighton & Kornfeld, 2009; Labrecque et al. 2013). Though information can be understood on two different levels according to Labrecque et al. (2013); power through (i) content consumption and (ii) content production.

Regarding consumption, the internet has allowed consumers to access information that is both company and consumer-created, which used to be non-existent or very hard to obtain (Labrecque et al. 2013). Some examples are information from company websites, professional and private product reviews, the ease of access to these reviews and other information such as performance data and prices. This has allowed consumers to improve their choice options for products and services. Thus, this multiplicity of information ultimately leads to more sophisticated and better-educated consumers who are more difficult to influence (Brynjolfsson, Hu, & Simester, 2011). An increase in available information further means, the total share of consumer awareness has decreased, thus leading to a relative increase in consumer power (Labrecque et al. 2013)

Another side effect is that with the ever-increasing amount of media consumption and available information has led to consumers consuming and processing information in increasingly shorter periods of time (Labrecque et al. 2013; Nielsen, 2011). This has helped to reduce adoption

cycles and increase diffusion of market trends, which according to Bass's (1969) diffusion theory also reduces product life cycles. In turn, this puts increasing amounts of pressure on marketers which is another example of how power has shifted towards the favour of consumers (Labrecque et al. 2013).

Concerning power through content production, the rise of web 2.0 has lifted many of the restrictions of the web 1.0 era which restricted consumers mainly to content consumption as consumers had only limited content creation and distribution abilities (Labrecque et al. 2013). However, due to the rise of web 2.0 information-based power through production has increased as many of the restrictions of web 1.0 were lifted. Consumers have started to be able to vocalise their opinions through electronic word of mouth (eWOM) (Deighton & Kornfeld, 2009). An example from the gaming industry is the use of the social medium platform YouTube, where consumers review the games for other people (AngryJoeShow, 2018; Gameranx, 2017; PeanutButterGamer, 2017). The phenomenon of power through content production shows that consumers have a desire for self-expression not only through feedback mechanisms such as product reviews but also through the creation of personal websites, blogs, podcasts and online videos (Labrecque et al. 2013).

2.1.1.2 Network-Based Power

"Network-based power centres on the metamorphosis of content through network actions designed to build personal reputation and influence market through the distribution, remixing and enhancement of digital content"

- (Labrecque et al. 2013, p.263)

In essence, network-based power refers to the ways by which extra value is added to that of the original content (Labrecque et al. 2013). This value is created through various activities such as content dissemination, completion and modification. Content dissemination refers to activities such as sharing and organising content through networks and online communities. Content completion refers to actions such as commenting on an online post that contributes to previous content and content modification to the repurposing of content through the creation of videos or even the creation of meme images (Labrecque et al. 2013). While content sharing has always been possible on the internet, the emergence of social media has made this process much

more accessible. Social media platforms have allowed for a massive increase in distribution and consumption of UGC (Smith, Fischer & Yongjian, 2012; Yannopoulou, Moufahim & Bian, 2013) to the degree that it has become an integral component for gaming communities when co-creating value. One example of this is the multitude of games such as, Fornite, PUBG and World of Warcraft, who encourage consumers to share videos of themselves playing through a share button or the option to easily record in-game play or highlights (Epic Games, 2018; Webster, 2016).

If one's network is strong and large enough, it will substantially increase one's ability to share and influence others (Labrecque et al. 2013). Thus, empowering consumers who distribute content, regardless of whether it is self-created, created by others, or co-created. The widespread of web 2.0 and social media has enabled the consumer to more easily influence other's decision-making by either liking, sharing, tagging or commenting on each other's content (Labrecque et al. 2013).

The commonality of these sources of power and consumer empowerment in the gaming industry is online communities. Online communities work as a platform for these different powers but also as a way to communicate with each other. Compared to traditional communities, online gaming communities have lower entry and exit barriers, as it is relatively easy for people to join a specific online community (Luo, Zhang & Liu, 2015). All that is required is a computer and internet. The ease also comes from the fact that people can join an online community without geographical constraints (Luo, Zhang & Liu, 2015). On the other hand, this also means it is easier for members of an online community to discard the current one and relatively easy find alternatives.

To summarise, the power of the consumers can be understood on multiple levels and in the gaming industry, it is crucial to understand information-based and network-based power as it has a direct influence on the relationship between both the company and consumer.

2.2 Value Co-Creation in Online Gaming Communities

For gaming companies, online gaming communities enable them to collaboratively interact with the active consumers, who are there out of their own interest. Because, it works as a platform for consumers and companies to interact and together co-create value for the games

(Luo, Zhang & Liu, 2015). Additionally, online communities also enable the companies to gain unique insights into consumer's needs and values through methods like observation and interactions (Kim, Sung & Kang, 2014).

The phenomenon of value co-creation can, therefore, help companies attract and keep consumers for extended periods of time, through higher engagement, while also working as a way to accommodate consumer empowerment. Thus, the rewards of successful online community interactions can be a fitting answer to the rise of the consumer empowerment where consumers have a chance to impact products and services.

Multiple studies have been conducted that show a definite connection between value co-creation through online communities and strong relations with the users (Carlson, Suter, & Brown, 2008; Zaglia, 2013; Zeithaml, Rust & Lemon, 2001). This is further identified by Muniz and Schau (2005), who explain how the combination of no time or geographical constraints with high transparency of information and easy two-way communication is the basis of success in online communities.

Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) coined the term value co-creation, which refers to the processes where both consumers and companies create value together (Banks & Potts, 2010; Pongsakornrunsilp & Schroeder, 2011; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). In value co-creation, the phrase, as mentioned before, 'value-in-use' is common and means that the company does not create the value, but instead, consumers create value by using the products or services (Grönroos, 2008; Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008). Thus, value co-creation, with the empowerment of consumers, appears to enable gaming companies to create high engagement and new ways to interact with them.

This thesis will provide additional insights into co-creation of values by focusing on gaming communities such as; EVE Online, Fortnite, PUBG and World of Warcraft. Due to, as earlier mentioned, them having successfully incorporated value co-creation in various ways and forms. As value-in-use shifts power to the consumer, there are different ways consumers get empowered. To better understand how value-in-use is operating in the gaming industry two different examples are presented in the following:

2.2.1 The Video Game: Half-Life -> Counter-Strike

Half-life is a single player shooting game created by the company Valve; that is, the game offered no multiplayer function. That was until Valve decided to partially open the game to allow for and encourage the creation of modifications to the game by the community (Arkaji & Lang, 2007). Modifications meant that they could modify the original game to their liking. Valve even distributed toolkits for users to be better equipped to create modifications. Within a year of this decision, two students created a modification called 'Counter-Strike' which ended up becoming very popular amongst the player community. Counter-strike, however, was, in essence, a completely different game even though it was a modification to Half-Life. The popularity of Counter-Strike soon surpassed that of Half-life, which led to Valve eventually re-appropriating the game and acquiring the game from the two students who created it. An actual example of how the company enabled the community to co-create a new game.

2.2.2 The Video Game: Fortnite

Fortnite, as aforementioned, is an example of how UGC can help co-create value for both the users as well as the companies. With the game highly encouraging the creation and sharing of video content through the inclusion of video replay functionality, that allows players to view recordings of their past matches and download them onto their computer. Furthermore, they encourage their community to upload video clips of themselves in exchange for entering different competitions.

The examples of both Counter-Strike and Fortnite are two of many examples that show how gaming companies have embedded co-creation of different kinds and make use of value-in-use. The examples are conceptually two different forms of UGC, were Fortnite being a more familiar form, Counter-strike represents a more unique way of incorporating UGC. Additionally, it can be difficult and costly to understand consumers due to an ever-shifting world of online networks that are redefining lifestyles, consumption patterns and are empowering consumers as discussed by Arakji and Lang (2007) and Labrecque et al. (2013). Making the concept of including the consumers in co-creation an even more interesting phenomenon to investigate.

2.3 The Value Co-Creation Egg

When examining existing literature, three main components are identified concerning the theoretical framework of the paper: Firstly, The Consumer attempts to identify what mechanism that drives value co-creation among the consumers. As the role of the consumer has drastically changed over the last decade with the rise of web 2.0, the paper will look into what that means for the gaming industry, while also identifying the underlying mechanisms (Goodrich & Mooji, 2014; Hennig-Thurau, Hofacker & Bloching, 2013; Hennig-Thurau, Malthouse, Friege, Gensler, Lobschat, Rangaswamy & Skiera, 2010; Westbrook, 1987). Secondly, The Company attempts at understanding what this change in consumer empowerment means for the gaming companies by understanding how the companies facilitate value co-creation with the consumers. Previous authors imply that a shift from consumers only belonging outside the company to now be an integral part of the value creation process appears to have changed (Cova & Dalli, 2009; Hennig-Thurgau, Hofacker & Bloching, 2013; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Storbacka et al. 2012). Thirdly, The Market seems to be disrupted as the power has shifted towards the consumers and the companies changing their approach to consumers and the market (Alba & Hutchinson, 1987; Banks & Potts, 2010; Pongsakornrunsilp & Schroeder, 2011). Thus, The Market is analysed by looking at the results found in the two previously mentioned elements. While analysing the effects of the actors, the paper is able to identify a broader understanding of how value is co-created within the market.

2.3.1 The Consumer

Traditionally, the ways for consumers to find information about companies or to know what values they stood by was through marketing or word of mouth (WOM) (Goodrich & Mooji, 2014; Hennig-Thurau, Hofacker & Bloching, 2013; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2010). Hennig-Thurgau, Hofacker and Bloching (2013) coined the term 'bowling', as it represents the traditional marketing strategy, that means a company uses its marketing instruments (bowling ball) to reach and influence consumers (the pins). Therefore, everything including value co-creation occurred inside the company. It is further viewed by Kotler and Keller (2016) that the function of marketing is to institute a forward flow of activity from the company to customers. Which can be obtained thought tactics such as the traditional marketing; media marketing,

email, commercials and such. (Kotler & Keller, 2016). For customers, this meant limited power and influence over the companies that produced the products and services.

The emergence of Web 2.0, social media and especially electronic word of mouth (eWOM) would prove to increase both power and influence (Belk, 2014; Berthon, Pitt, Plangger & Shapiro, 2012; Fournier & Avery, 2011; Goodrick and Mooij, 2014). The traditional WOM involved sharing personal information with friends, family and others but was quickly disrupted with the emergence of web 2.0, by enabling consumers with interconnectivity. The social media landscape and access to all sorts of information at one's fingers has allowed consumers to enable eWOM, create content, and make their opinions and thoughts heard across the globe to anyone that is willing to listen (Labrecque et al. 2013). With much of today's social media landscape being created, not for marketers but people, it is important to remember that much of the social media landscape was not created with commerce in mind (Deighton & Kornfeld, 2009; Fournier & Avery, 2011).

Therefore, the traditional view of the market is being challenged by the emergence of consumer empowerment, where consumers are more (i) connected, (ii) informed and (iii) empowered (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). Leading towards active consumers who are no longer satisfied with the traditional ways of creating value (bowling), Hennig-Thurau, Hofacker and Bloching (2013) suggests a movement towards pinball-like interactions (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Labrecque et al. 2013; Fournier & Avery, 2011; Hennig-Thurau, Hofacker & Bloching, 2013). Pinball-like interactions that is; the company forwards some information or an action (the ball), and they lose almost all control of it as the ball is bouncing back and forth through the entire marketplace (Hennig-Thurau, Hofacker & Bloching, 2013)

To summarise, the consumer has become more educated and sophisticated, and thus way harder to predict and influence by companies (Brynjolfsson, Hu, & Simester, 2011). The emergence of consumer empowerment has further challenged the company-centric view, as referred to as bowling by Hennig-Thurau, Hofacker & Bloching (2013) and suggest more pinball-like interactions. The role of the consumer has genuinely changed, and so should the ways companies be thinking of them. Though, the next section will seek to explain how the companies function and are affected by consumer empowerment.

2.3.2 The Company

The traditional concept of value creation, as aforementioned, the market is company-centric, and consumers are considered 'outside the company' (Cova & Dalli, 2009; Hennig-Thurgau, Hofacker & Bloching, 2013; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Storbacka, Frow, Nenonen & Payne, 2012). This is, as aforementioned, also discussed by Hennig-Thurgau, Hofacker and Bloching (2013) with the term *bowling*, as the only way for people to gain information was from the company.

Companies understanding of customer-relationship management was conceptualised as managing and targeting the right customers, and the company-consumer interactions were not considered a way to create value (Normann & Ramirez, 1994; Wikström, 1996). The extraction and exchange of value is the primary concept of the traditional market. Thus, the company generated value, which was exchanged in the market and received by the consumer. Indicating, the flow of communication only consists of a one-way direction that excludes consumers. Companies used to see consumers as people who needed to be persuaded by their communication and values, for them to sell their products and services (Hennig-Thurau, Hofacker & Bloching, 2013). However, times have changed, and companies can no longer act on their own accord when it comes to, designing products or creating marketing messages and campaigns, without interference from consumers (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004).

The phenomenon of consumer empowerment indicates that consumers are forming their own values. Companies are no longer chosen based on what values they are pushing forward but how well the values align between actors (company and consumer). Therefore, value co-creation for an online gaming company is the result of understanding and listening to as many consumers as possible. For example, not recognising this change, can have grave repercussions for a company, as Ernst and Young (2011) have pointed out about the future generation (Y):

"They are today the catalysts and the incubators of change, but each day their influence is growing in consumer and corporate environments, meaning that organisations must learn to engage effectively now, or risk being shut out of the game" (p.5)

Companies need to break free from the traditional company-centric view and incorporate consumers in value creation (Hennig-Thurau, Hofacker & Bloching, 2013). Thus, challenging the roles of both the companies and consumers and head towards a co-creation of value, where consumers and companies work collaboratively.

This does not mean that companies need to adhere to whatever customers do, as it is not customer focused. Nor does it treat the customer as king (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). The company needs to set boundaries and create a framework, and within that framework they allow consumers to participate actively; thus, it is becoming a joint process rather than driven by one of the actors (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Noticeable, co-creation is neither a mean to outsource work to consumers, setting up a few events to engage them or making ordinary products more extraordinary as discussed by LaSalle and Britton (2003). Therefore, value co-creation runs deeper and should affect the foundation and roots of a company in various decisions processes.

To enable such a deeper integration of value co-creation, Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) discuss a framework they call DART that represents four essential elements: Dialogue, Access, Risk-benefits and Transparency. They can pinpoint general elements for companies to consider before accepting value co-creation into the heart of their business. While all elements play an essential role, dialogues especially are the focal point of successfully integrating value co-creation (Levine, Locke, Searls & Weinberger, 2001; Prahalad & Ramaswamy). Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004, p.5) emphasise this especially by saying that "Armed with new tools and dissatisfied with available choices, consumers want to interact with firms and thereby co-create value. The use of interaction as a basis for co-creation is at the crux of our emerging reality."

Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) refer the DART model to the building blocks of interactions for co-creation of value (p.9). They describe the access block, as being the company giving access to all necessary information from, both the company and consumer, to the consumer. While, the transparency block is linked to not hiding secrets or withholding information for the consumers (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Lastly, they discuss the block called risk-benefit is accumulating from successful access and transparency so both the consumer and company can evaluate the risks and benefits. Consequently, it indicates that parts of this model will be applicable for the case of this study and understanding of The Market and the impact this framework has on it.

Within the gaming industry, the game Fortnite, published by Epic Games, works as an excellent example as they rely heavily on co-creation of the game and incorporation of the user's in various stages of the process. Recently, Epic Games posted a competition on their Facebook page, where they encouraged the community to post videos of themselves dancing, and in

exchange, there would be prices with one of these prices even consisting of the participants dance being featured in the game itself (see Appendix A).

Epic Games, therefore, collaboratively create new content and value with the community through correct dialogues, as they enable users to influence the game and therefore create a level of transparency (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Another means to co-create value, as aforementioned, is 'value-in-use' as value can be generated when consumers are recording themselves play the game, either doing something impressive or funny and sending it to the company who might share it on their respective and relevant platforms to be seen by the entire community (Vargo & Lusch, 2008). This creates a win-win scenario for both the company and consumer; (i) *The Consumer* is rewarded with the 'fame' in the community and (ii) *The Company* is rewarded with higher consumer engagement.

2.3.3 The Market

Through the definition of value co-creation coined earlier by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004), the phenomenon works with the purpose of creating value together. For the consumer in the middle it creates an opportunity for consumers to utilise their consumption to demonstrate knowledge and expertise (Alba & Hutchinson, 1987); represent an identity (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2010) and form social networks (Holt, 1995). Banks and Potts (2010) recognises the rise of UGC as a way for consumers to utilise their consumption, especially in the gaming industry. Thus, the consumers in the gaming industry shift towards also becoming producers of value (Banks & Potts, 2010). A phenomenon which is referred in the Service-Dominant-Logic (S-D-L) framework, as the change from a company-centric view to a co-creation of value relationship (Vargo & Lusch, 2008).

Moving from a traditional company-consumer interaction towards a more modern and fluent, which considers consumers an integral part of the value creation process. The Market represents an ideal scenario or a result of how value is created. It identifies both actors as not being static; thus, constant communication through different activities (e.g. online discussions, enable consumers to participate in product development etc.) is needed. Consequently, The Market is the ideal situation, as it represents a scenario where value is aligned, and both actors are considered of equivalent importance. In perspective of the thesis, the focus is on how value is co-created following the perspective of Pongsakornrunsilp and Schroeder (2011), where value co-creation is the process of creating value with the consumer and not for them.

The internet has, as mentioned earlier, created a shift in power towards the consumers, and companies need to find new ways to accommodate consumer empowerment. Value co-creation enables the companies to connect with consumers on a new level, as the traditional ways of doing marketing and interacting appear to be slowly vanishing. As the cost of producing high-quality video games have increased exponentially in the last 20 years, minimising risk in the gaming industry has also never been more important, (van Lent 2008; Le Diberder 2012). Therefore, connecting with consumers and involving them in the value creation process might aid to minimise this risk.

The Interactions in Figure 1 indicates that communication with the consumers has shifted from merely telling stories to sharing in collaboration with the companies (Pongsakornrunsilp & Schroeder, 2011). Also, communication is a never-ending process that affects those involved. Consumers no longer only belong at the end of the value chain; instead, they assume a vital role in the entire processes of value creation (Pongsakornrunsilp & Schroeder, 2011). This implies challenges for companies, as consumers can act unpredictable and inconsistent even with best efforts to control and constrain them (Gabriel & Lang, 2008). Such challenges can to an extent be controlled by understanding what gives value to the consumers (Arnould & Price, 2000). To summarise, the interactions are able to present the consumer empowerment and that companies and consumers are in a constant dialogue. Furthermore, interactions are deeply integrated into all of the other elements and thus will not be treated separately but understood in relation to the actors.

Considering these three elements and incorporating them together will provide visualisation to The Value Co-Creation Egg as seen in Figure 1. The framework consists of four elements called: (i) *The Company*: how companies facilitate value co-creation (ii) *The Consumer*: How value is co-created in online gaming communities (iii) *The Market*: How the interactions and relations between the actors are functioning. Lastly, the framework will work as a guide throughout the research as each research question aims at understanding each of the three elements.

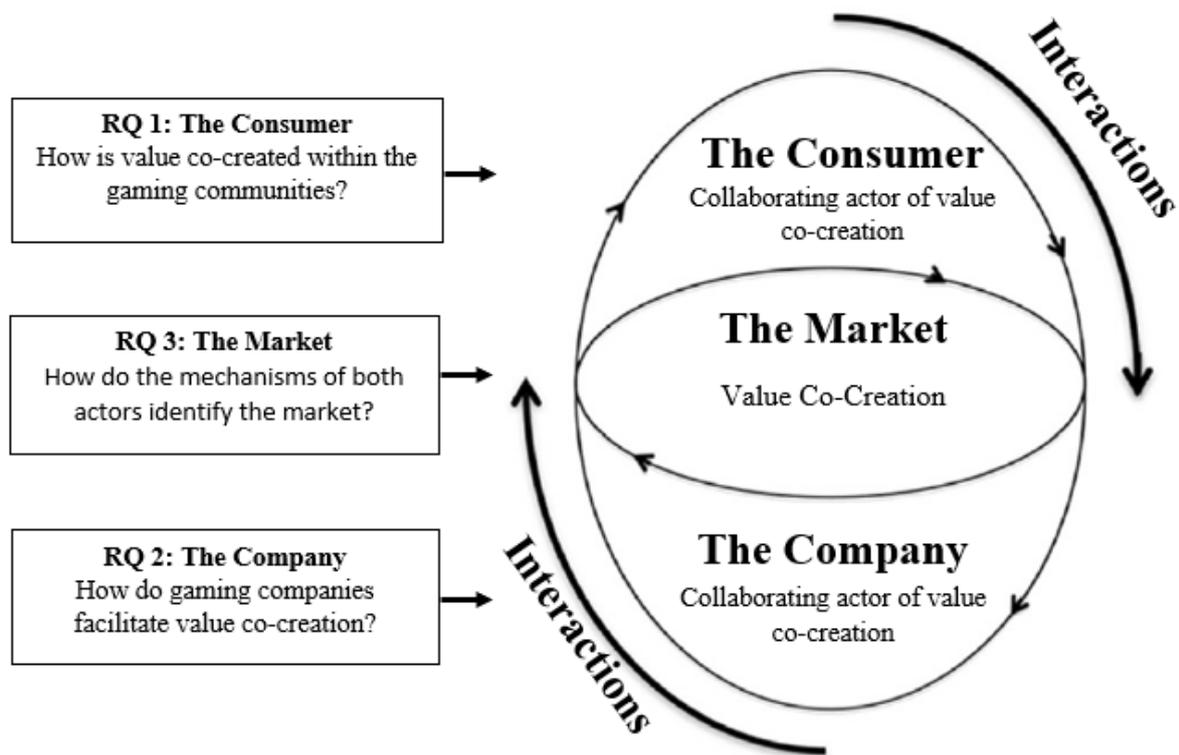


Figure 1 A representation of the dynamic and communication between actors is co-creation of value (Adapted from Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004)

To summarise, these three components (see Figure 1) become the focal point of how the thesis is structured but also how the empirical findings are presented and analysed. While it has been established that both actors need to interact to operate in The Market, it has not been able to identify how these interactions take place in the online gaming communities. The model then aims at gaining a broader understanding of how these actors interact in online gaming communities.

3 Methodology

This chapter provides insight into how the thesis utilises an abductive approach to qualitative research with the aim to explore the field. Furthermore, a philosophy of analysis is presented to justify the use of content analysis. The chapter further explains the use of netnography as the data collection method of both The Consumer and The Company. Consequently, an outline of how the data is analysed and how the findings from The Consumer and The Company help the researchers identify The Market.

3.1 Research Approach

3.1.1 Qualitative / Exploratory Approach

Value co-creation is a highly abstract concept that has only recently started gaining traction in academic research, as such research of value co-creation in the gaming industry is still very lacking. As this paper aims to understand the phenomenon of co-creation within the context of the gaming industry, the decision has been made to utilise qualitative methods as these allow for greater understanding and interpretation of local meanings (Braun & Clarke 2013, p. 4). Alternatively, as Poovey (1995) mentions "There are limits to what the rationalising knowledge epitomised by statistics can do. No matter how precise, quantification cannot inspire action, especially in a society whose bonds are forged by sympathy, not more calculation" (p.84). As value co-creation and gaming communities, both spring forth of interactions between people quantifying the relationships, opinions and motivations will ultimately be much less likely to lead to understanding. This is also mentioned by Braun and Clarke (2013) who point out that "[q]ualitative research is about finding meaning, not numbers" (p.13). Other authors have also pointed out that meanings belong to the field of qualitative research (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015).

Furthermore, the explorative nature of this study, due to the limited amount of research on the topic, makes qualitative methods highly suitable as they lend themselves well to explorative studies (Brown, 2006; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). This thesis will thus aim to

provide initial research into value co-creation in the gaming industry with the goal to form a basis for the execution of more conclusive future research into this topic. Taking all of this into consideration qualitative research approach has been deemed to be most appropriate for this study.

3.1.2 Abductive Approach

To be able to provide insightful and meaningful data in this explorative study, the research is conducted with an abductive approach, as it means to "enter the field with the deepest and broadest theoretical base possible" (Timmermans & Tavory 2012, p. 180). Furthermore, as the field has not been studied extensively, abduction provides the function and ability to provide more surprising explanations (Shank 2008, Timmermans & Tavory 2012).

Dubois and Gadde (2002) argue that an abductive approach is to be seen different from a mix between inductive and deductive approach. An abductive approach is preferred if the researcher's objective is to discover new things and move fluently between empirical fieldwork, analysis and so forth (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). Thus, the departure of this thesis was to identify a research gap within the gaming community, namely the phenomenon of how value co-creation is generated and facilitated by both actors. The next logical step was to find literature that could shine light and explanation for this phenomenon. As extensive research has been done on value co-creation communities and to some degree, online communities, it is possible to have broader literature that can help answer and adapt the research questions. Gathering empirical data through netnography will help the thesis provide insights into the way consumers and companies interact with each other. Thus, the thesis will be able to generate new theory that gains a deeper understanding of how value is co-created in the gaming industry.

3.1.3 Philosophy of Analysis

As the thesis is exploring value co-creation in online gaming communities, a topic with very little existing literature, the analysis method is preferred to be more intuitive and open to discoveries. For that purpose, the research will conduct a grounded analysis that enables a broader and more open approach to qualitative data (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Therefore, the thesis does not attempt at imposing predefined ideas or concepts of the data. It is further shown as the paper aims at building theory from patterns

that are grounded in the data; that is, the data is used to identify the patterns (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Additionally, the analysis is grounded by trying "[t]o understand the meaning of data fragments in the specific context in which they are created" (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015, pp.191). For this paper, it means the researchers engage with the data in context to the culture, time and other relevant dimensions in the online gaming communities, thus aid the researchers in interpreting and understanding it (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015, pp.191).

3.2 Research Design and Data Collection

3.2.1 Netnography

The internet, due to the existence of countless of groups and communities that form and are created around blogs, social media, video and image sharing websites, as well as virtual worlds such as those found in many online video games, makes it a lucrative source of research (Kozinets, 2010). Netnography, also known as ethnography research conducted utilising the internet, is mainly designed to study online communities and their cultures (Kozinets, 2002). Kozinets (2010) argues that netnography is a very suitable method of research for both professionals but also newcomers to research. As a marketing research technique, the strength of netnography lies in its ability to access publicly available information on various online platforms (Kozinets, 2002; Sharma, Ahuja & Alavi, 2018). As well as, its ability to use this information to identify and understand needs, motivations, opinions and influences on decision making of online consumers groups and communities (Kozinets, 2002; Sharma, Ahuja & Alavi, 2018). As in this study, the focus is on online gaming communities, how they co-create value and how companies engage online communities to achieve this, a netnographic study was deemed to be the most effective due to the method's inherent focus on online communities (Kozinets, 2002; Sharma, Ahuja & Alavi, 2018).

Additionally, compared with other methods such as focus groups and interviews, netnography is entirely unobtrusive unless it chooses not to be (Kozinets, 2002; Richard & Roy, 2005). This allows researchers to observe natural occurring behaviours and interactions. The natural and unobtrusive nature of netnography, a combination not often found in other marketing research methods, allows researchers to have continuous access to informants in various online social settings and previously observable consumer and group interactions and behaviours (Kozinets,

2002). In this study, this allows for the collection of untainted data, through the gathering of comments and data that has been generated by users without them having prior knowledge of this study taking place. Furthermore, netnography is similar to traditional ethnography as it facilitates thick descriptions through the immersion of the researcher in the occurrences and philosophy of online communities (Kozinets, 2010). Geertz (1973) explains that thick descriptions are a way to provide cultural context as well as meaning to things, words, actions and the like. Because of this, thick descriptions can provide context for people outside of a culture to understand meanings behind certain behaviours (Geertz, 1973). This way readers of this study that have no, or only limited knowledge of the gaming industry will still be able to understand the context of the of the empirical findings.

For these reasons the decision has been made to conduct a netnographic study as the nature of the gaming industry and online gaming communities will allow for the gathering of large quantities of high-quality data through the observation and recording of interactions of companies with communities on online social platforms such as social media and public forums. Kozinets (2010) refers to the different social actors as nodes and ties as the relations between them, however for the sake of simplicity in this paper the words actors and relations are used instead.

Kozinets (2002) describes netnography as "a new qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to study cultures and communities that are emerging through computer-mediated communications" (p.62). While netnography is highly flexible Kozinets (2002) does recommend a guideline that ethnographic studies can follow:

1. Entrée: Formulation of research question and identification of suitable online forums and platforms for the study. When identified, which forums and communities to choose can be determined by five criteria: (i) degree of focus and research question relevance, topic or community, (ii) amount of postings, (iii) number of discrete posters, (iv) availability of detailed or descriptively rich data, (v) frequency of inter-member interactions (Kozinets, 2002)

2. Data collection: (i) Gathering and copying of data from online communications of community members, (ii) data from researcher observations of the community, community members, interactions and meanings (Kozinets, 2002).

3. Data analysis: Grouping, coding and contextualisation of data.

4. Ethics: (i) the researchers should fully disclose their presence and intentions to committee members during research; (ii) The researchers need to ensure the protection of community members anonymity and privacy; (iii) researchers need to consider the incorporation of feedback stemming from the communities themselves; (iv) researchers need to be aware and careful of the private versus public medium issue. As such researchers need to obtain the consent of community members to use any postings or data that are to be quoted directly any of the research (Kozinets, 2002).

5. Member checks: Members of the communities researched should be shown some or all of the research report to hear their comments and remarks (Kozinets, 2002)

For this particular study, the focus is on what Kozinets (2010) defines as social networks. By his definition, social networks are "groups of people who are connected by particular social relationships, shared hobbies or common interests, or by the exchanging of any information" (Kozinets, 2010, p. 49). In the case of this thesis, this would mean online social networks that share gaming as a common interest and hobby that also exchange information with one another through social networking platforms such as social media sites and public forums. These networks, in turn, can also be seen as communities that are formed around these shared hobbies and interests. Barry Wellman (2001) argued that "computer networks are inherently social networks" (p.277). As such in this study, the researchers partially take ideas from social network analysis. In particular, in this thesis, social network analysis is used to describe social networks, identify patterns within them and to discover the flows of information and other resources (Garton, Haythornthwaite & Wellman, 1999). By finding this information, one can then start to uncover what effects these networks have on people and organisations (Garton, Haythornthwaite & Wellman, 1999). Which, in the case of this thesis, translates to uncovering of how online gaming communities and the online relations and interactions between the various actors affect the co-creation of value in the video game industry.

For this study, several gaming communities were identified on social media and public forums according to Kozinets (2002) previously mentioned guidelines concerning Entrée (i) Forums, and social media pages were selected that had a high degree of relevance to the research question. As such, it was determined that social networks focused on multiplayer games have larger communities and more potential to showcase how value is co-created within online communities due to the higher level of player interactions. (ii) Social media pages and forums with large amounts of posts prioritised, which in the case of this study meant that focus was put

on social networks focused around games that are currently are, or have been, widely known and talked about. This was sometimes hard to determine as many forums do not disclose statistics concerning the number of users or the total number of posts. However, through observations, it was possible to determine how active every forum was by looking at the frequency of postings. Regarding social media pages, activity was also determined by the number of likes of each of the social media pages. (iii) The number of discrete posters was in this thesis of less relevance as on social media pages people usually post under their real names, while on gaming related forums members typically post under a pseudonym or username. Nevertheless, in neither scenario is one able to post entirely discreetly. (iv) For similar reasons as criteria (i) social media pages and forums focused on multiplayer games allow for gathering more significant amounts of detailed and rich data due to the interactive nature of multiplayer games. (v) As intra-member communication was seen to be the primary focus of most, if not all, social media pages and forums, this criterion was not considered to a large extent, and as such every social network site was thought of having similar if not identical levels of intra-member communication.

Finally, all of these criteria were combined with the researchers own knowledge of; the gaming landscape, video games that show high levels of co-creation and the researchers own personal knowledge on the games the researched communities subscribe to. Once identified, data in the form of comments of community members on social media pages and public forums were gathered and copied into Microsoft Excel and indexed by game and network type with each comment having notes and related observations made by researchers.

The data gathered from the netnographic study will ultimately allow for greater understanding the phenomenon of value co-creation in online gaming communities and how video game companies facilitate co-creation with them through observing and recording the interactions that occur between these two actors.

3.2.2 Identified Social Networks for Netnography

The main identified forums consist of (i) official social media pages of particular video game titles (ii) company managed official community forums (iii) third-party managed forums and social platforms. Concerning third-party platforms, Reddit was deemed to be the most relevant third-party platform for all of the games as the largest subreddits (Subforums on specific topics within Reddit) in some cases saw even more significant levels of postings than official forums. Nevertheless, even in those cases, official forums were still also included due to the higher levels of interaction from the companies themselves.

Table 1 Main platforms used for data collection

| Game | EVE Online | Fornite | PUBG | World of Warcraft |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--|---------------------------------|
| Social Media | www.facebook.com /eveonline | www.facebook.com /FortniteGame | www.facebook.com /PUBG | www.facebook.com /Warcraft/ |
| Official Forum | www.forums. eveonline.com | www.epicgames.com /fortnite/forums | forums. playbattlegrounds.com | eu.battle.net /forums/en/wow |
| Third-Party Forum | www.reddit.com /r/Eve | www.reddit.com /r/FortNiteBR/ | www.reddit.com /r/PUBATTLE GROUNDS | www.reddit.com /r/wow/ |

As can be seen in Table 1, the netnographic study was focused mainly on social media pages and public forums of four games. These networking platforms of these four games, in particular, were chosen mainly based on their activity in terms of postings and relevance to the research question. The online multiplayer nature of these games also showed to have higher amounts of intra-member communication, as well as a higher degree of communication with and from the video companies themselves. Furthermore, as both researchers have been active members of most of these communities' various jargon, words and cultures were more easily understood.

While the data was gathered from the previously mentioned platforms, the platforms themselves have no relevance to the study; thus, it has been decided to not name each platform by name in the empirical findings and analysis. To not distract readers from the findings themselves, each platform has been numbered by type instead, as can be seen in Table 2, 3 and 4 below. Furthermore, as the posters themselves are determined not to be relevant, but rather what they are posting is, for the purpose of this research the posters will be kept anonymous. Therefore, every post quoted in the empirical findings will be referred to as forums or social media.

Table 2 Social media platform references

| | |
|--------------------------------|----------------|
| EVE Online Social Media | Social Media 1 |
| Fornite Social Media | Social Media 2 |
| PUBG Social Media | Social Media 3 |
| World of Warcraft Social Media | Social Media 4 |

Table 3 Official forum references

| | |
|----------------------------------|---------|
| EVE Online Official Forum | Forum 1 |
| Fornite Official Forum | Forum 2 |
| PUBG Official Forum | Forum 3 |
| World of Warcraft Official Forum | Forum 4 |

Table 4 Third-party forum references

| | |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------|
| EVE Online Third-Party Forum | Third-Party Forum 1 |
| Fornite Third-Party Forum | Third-Party Forum 2 |
| PUBG Third-Party Forum | Third-Party Forum 3 |
| World of Warcraft Third-Party Forum | Third-Party Forum 4 |

In Table 5, an overview of the data read and gathered is given. "Post read" refers to the total amount of posts the researchers have read, some threads that posts were made in contained several thousands of responses, in which case, not every post was read as this was determined not to be feasible. An example of the gathered data can be found in Appendix B.

Table 5 Data gathered

| Game | Post Read | Posts Gathered and Analysed |
|--------------------------|------------------|------------------------------------|
| EVE Online | 713 | 100 |
| Fornite | 910 | 125 |
| PUBG | 683 | 130 |
| World of Warcraft | 1031 | 140 |
| Total | 3337 | 248 |

Data was subsequently entered into Excel, after which it was coded and further re-coded (as explained in the next section). Lastly, the findings are presented in Chapter 4 to initially identify the mechanisms of the two actors.

3.2.3 Data Analysis

To cope with grounded analysis, the following seven steps presented by Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2015) will be drawn on: familiarisation, reflection, open coding, conceptualisation, focused re-coding, linking and re-evaluation.

In the initial stage of the analysis, the researchers would familiarise themselves with the data by sifting through all available data found on various online forums, social media pages and similar. As it was an explorative study, it became even more critical to initially not omit any found data as what is essential could not be determined (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). The data was then placed into the creative data tool Excel, where the data was sorted by to what degree it can explain or help understand each of the first two research questions regarding the consumer and company. The Value Co-Creation Egg (see Chapter 2.3.2, Figure 1) was further used in the initial stage of familiarising and collection of the data, by using the understanding of the egg model to structure the observations. Thus, building 'walls' around the data. The walls, which are presented as The Consumer and The Company, guide the data collection and familiarisation by creating a clear structure from the get-go. The researchers then reflected by evaluating and critiquing the gathered data in according to the imposed research questions. Thus, the data was initially coded in an attempt to link some of the data together and obtain a greater overview of what data can help answer each research question.

In the second stage, the data was initially open-coded in Microsoft Excel, as a way of summarising the meaning of a chunk of data (Charmaz, 2014; Saldaña, 2009). The initial coding was an attempt to link the data further together and understand what can be of interest. Following up, the researchers sought to conceptualise the data to discover patterns among the codes that were characterised by; similarity, difference, frequency and exceptional observations (Saldaña, 2009). The identified patterns were then presented in Chapter 4 of the empirical data, as the patterns that were to be essential for understanding the two actors (Charmaz, 2014; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). The patterns were further represented according to The Value Co-Creation Egg (see Chapter 2.3.2, Figure 1) in the sense that each actor was separated to understand each of their roles better and answer the research questions. Thus, The Value Co-Creation Egg framework guided the analysis by firstly presenting the empirical relevant data to answer the research questions related to The Consumer and The Company.

In the third stage, the analysis of the empirical findings, the data was being focused re-coded into what the researchers discovered as the most interesting patterns that helped explain research question one and two. Thus, each research question was answered with the most relevant patterns as a result of the study. Although research question one and two were answered, the researchers used the results to answer research question three. Research question three is referred to The Market presented in the framework (see Chapter 2.3.2, Figure 1), where they linked the patterns from both actors to fully understand the imposed question of how value is co-created in the market.

Lastly, the researcher re-evaluated the results and proposed future research ideas to understand further how value is co-created in online gaming communities. The re-evaluation also included potential gaps and omitted factors that could be of importance for future research.

3.2.4 Reliability and Validity

For qualitative research, the traditional concepts of validity and reliability do not fully capture the same meaning as when conducting quantitative research (Elo, Kääriäinen, Kanste, Pölkki, Utriainen & Kyngäs, 2014; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Nonetheless, some authors have adapted reliability and validity to access qualitative research and define the terms differently (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982; Mason, 1996). Especially LeCompte and Goetz (1982) and Kirk and Miller (1986), have a slightly different interpretation. Consequently, the thesis follows LeCompte and Goetz (1982) adaptation of reliability and validity and coins them: (i) external reliability (ii) internal reliability (iii) internal validity and (iv) external validity.

Initially, the external reliability is rather low due to the nature of qualitative studies, as they can prove to be somewhat difficult to replicate (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Kirk & Miller, 1986; LeCompte & Goetz, 1982). As LeCompte and Goetz (1982) it is impossible to 'freeze' the initial circumstances that the social setting is observed in, thus making it that more difficult to replicate. Moreover, the internet is a social setting with rapid development, and shifting context makes that much harder to 'freeze' it in place.

To cope with the initial low external reliability, Chapter 3.4.1 will aim at providing a rich description of what data the researchers are seeking, while Chapter 3.4.3 will introduce a phase-by-phase guide to how the actual data is analysed. This is done to overall increase the degree

to which the study can be replicated, even though the nature of qualitative research makes it a challenge.

Internal reliability refers to what degree the researchers agree on what they observe (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The research is conducted by two researchers, and thus the internal reliability is at stake if not thoroughly discussed. To increase the internal reliability of the study, the researchers in Chapter 3.4.1 identify what criteria there should be, while also describing how the data is collected into Microsoft Excel and collectively categories. Consequently, the data is processed as one unit, rather than two separates to increase the internal reliability.

Internal validity refers to, by which there is a good match between researcher's observations and theory developed (Bryman & Bell, 2015.). LeCompte and Goetz (1982) argue that in mainly ethnographic studies and observations the internal validity would be high, as the studies are often conducted over a more extended period. High internal validity as netnography observations of community members are looked upon over a more extended period of time, to ensure a high level of congruence between concepts and observations (LeCompte & Goetz, 2015).

External validity, which refers to what degree the study can be generalised across a social setting, would initially prove to be low as qualitative studies tend to use smaller samples or a small number of case studies (Bryman & Bell, 2015; LeCompte & Goetz, 1982). However, to tackle the status of low external validity, the research is conducted across multiple platforms and communities with the high amount of sampling as presented in Chapter 3.4.2. Thus, providing the research with a higher level of external validity as netnography allows the researchers to gain access to a more extensive selection of platforms and observations than regular ethnography (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Thus, the study has a higher chance to be generalised across social settings.

3.2.5 Ethical Considerations

The problem with qualitative research is that it can suffer from a lack of transparency, as it has less strict guidelines than that of, for example, quantitative research (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Keeping this in mind, as this study was based entirely on qualitative data, it is of paramount importance to be transparent and concise concerning the data collection process and analysis. In the case of this thesis, this was done through the use of software such as Microsoft Excel in

which the coding process was clearly shown. However, qualitative coding does run into the risk of losing the context of the content, in that when citing from qualitative coding the written comments or oral answers can have different interpretations depending on the setting in which they were gathered (Bryman & Bell, 2015). To avoid this, the researchers made sure to observe the situations in which comments were made, which was all noted down to guarantee transparency.

Another problem with qualitative data analysis is that the collected data, depending on the context, can contain various degrees of demographic information. This can be problematic as this might make it difficult to safeguard the identities of the people from which the data was gathered (Bryman & Bell, 2015). This is also often a problem in netnographic studies, which is why Kozinets (2002) includes ethical considerations in his guidelines (as seen in Chapter 3.4.1). Kozinets (2002) is also primarily concerned with protecting the identities of community members from which data is gathered. For this reason, he believes that assuring anonymity and privacy is essential when conducting a netnographic study. In the case of this thesis, this problem was largely omitted automatically as the majority of data collected was done through netnography on forums on which only nicknames and as such the actual identity of the individuals behind the post is usually confidential.

While Herring (1996) argues that since the authors writing under these handles are already content with the internet to associate their comments with their nicknames, they will also not object for these comments to appear in print. Furthermore, due to the existence of highly advanced search engines such as Google, Yahoo and others hiding the identity of members of public forms is nigh impossible as these search engines allow others to search for these exact quotes (Hair & Clark, 2007). Nevertheless, to maximise confidentiality the decision was made not to display either real names or usernames, as in some cases one might still be able to discover someone's real identity through a person's username (as might be the case for certain well-known community members or company employees).

In the case of interviews or other such form data of collection, it is always crucial to gain consent from participants to be able to use and record comments for the use in a study (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). However, in the case of netnography gaining consent is often very difficult, which poses an ethical problem (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Kozinets, 2002). However, Kozinets (2011) also argues that the on the internet information is inherently free to access. Kozinets (2010) does also mention that it depends on the type of online forum if informed

consent is required; such as, if the forums and social media pages researched are of public nature, anyone can read them freely without needing to be a subscribing member. In this case, Kozinets (2010) argues that informed consent is not necessary unless the poster himself believes his actions to be of a private nature. Therefore, efforts have been made to contact and inform individual posters whose comments have been used in this study to inform them about the inclusion of their comments in this study, in the case a user was explicitly against this their comments would be not included in this study. However, most posters did not reply to messages possibly due to either being no longer active or only logging in on the forums very infrequently. Those that did reply were more than willing to have their comments appear in this research. Nevertheless, as many did not reply, care was taken when choosing which quotes to use as prescribed by Hair and Clark (2007).

3.2.6 Limitations

Like any other study, there were several limitations to this study. Most importantly, as the study was only conducted over a period of 10 weeks, time was very limited which caused some methodological choices to be limited. The limited timeframe, while affecting the study as a whole, had the most impact on the data gathering. Ideally, netnographic methods can be combined with other methods such as interviews, which in the case of this would allow for an even better understanding of rationales and motivations behind co-creation in the gaming industry. However, the time-intensive nature of netnography and the limited timeframe restricted the practical use of additional methods. Nevertheless, the explorative nature of this study allowed and research questions that lend themselves well to a netnographic study allowed the researchers to produce some highly interesting findings and conclusions.

Another limitation of the study was the choice of taking an abductive approach. While this allowed the researchers to continuously revisit and revise parts of the thesis as certain aspects became more explicit, which allowed for flexibility in the reasoning and argumentations made in this study. The downside was that this is much less linear than inductive or deductive approaches, and thus can be more complicated to follow as it requires the researchers to continually re-assess previous sections as the research progressed (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Furthermore, one can argue that this non-linear approach and need for reassessment also make an abductive approach more time-consuming. However, taking an abductive approach allows

for researchers to "select the best explanation from competing explanations or interpretations" (Bryman & Bell, 2015 p. 27). Alvesson and Kärreman (2007) also mention that such an approach allows the researchers to be open to being surprised by data instead of using data to confirm pre-conceptions.

When it comes to netnography, the decision to focus communities formed around online games rather than video games as a whole can be seen as a limitation. However, as co-creation is a process that involves multiple actors, it can be argued that online games, with their highly interactive communities, are much more likely to interact with each other and the company and thus more likely to co-create. Furthermore, it also just happens to be the case that the most popular video games are usually multiplayer games. For example, in a Forbes article of 2018's biggest games, only one title was an exclusively single-player game (Thier, 2018). Another limitation with netnography, as mentioned by Kozinets (2002), is that it almost exclusively focuses on online communities. However, as this paper explicitly focuses on online communities, this would sooner be a strength than a weakness.

In regard to the use of a grounded analysis, the holistic and open nature allows for the "understanding the meaning of data in the specific context in which they were generated" (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015, p.191). While this way of analysing does reduce the complexity that belongs to qualitative data analysis, it inherently is a slow and incremental process that has the potential of overwhelming researchers at the beginning of the analysis process (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). In order to reduce the complexity, the data was coded into patterns and subsequently reduced into fewer patterns. This does pose a potential risk in that reducing the number of patterns might cause other relevant patterns to be omitted. However, as this study is an exploratory study with the aim to generate a more in-depth understanding of how value is co-created in the video game industry, the reducing of patterns allows for the selection and incorporation of the most relevant and substantial statements. This because a grounded analysis also allows the researchers to be highly engaged with their data even until relatively late in the research process (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Nevertheless, while it was determined that the data gathered and used was more than sufficient for a comprehensive analysis, all of these limitations should be taken into consideration during the execution of this study.

4 Empirical Findings

This chapter presents the empirical findings regarding how value is co-created in the communities and how the companies facilitate it. The chapter is divided into three parts; the first part identifies how The Consumer co-creates value and the second part identifies how The Company facilitates value co-creation. Finally, in the third part, the findings are summarised in order to capitalise the dominant patterns. These findings will subsequently be analysed and discussed further in Chapter 5. The results of this analysis will, in turn, allow the third and final research question to be answered, which is related to The Market, and the final part of The Value Co-Creation Egg model.

4.1 Part 1: The Consumer

Throughout the netnography observations, it was possible to find repeating, and interesting examples of different ways value is co-created in regard to The Consumer perspective (see Figure 1). After the gathering of data in the form of comments and observations, the data went through initial coding to discover common patterns within the data. The following type of comments, in particular, stood out quickly:

"I put together an in-depth video that explains exactly how to Ramp Rush your opponent like a pro! Hope it helps!" - Forum 2

"Here at EVE University - a player-run initiative - we hold regular classes ... on pretty much every aspect of EVE Online ... absolutely anyone can join them" - Forum 1

These comments show that helping other community members plays a significant role in many of the online communities that were observed, as these types of comments were seen to appear quite consistently. It was quickly discovered that gaming communities help other members in various ways such as through; the creation of video guides as seen in the first example, player

ran initiatives as seen in the second example and also in the form of written guides as is the case in the following example:

"Created a new EVE mission guides website, over 620 missions posted up so far with more work to be done as free time is available" - Forum 1

Guides video guides and written guides, as shown in the examples, are supposed to educate and help people with specific aspects of a game. These posts are made voluntary and can potentially require a lot of work and knowledge about the topic it covers. This aspect of voluntarily putting in hours of work is also something that is emphasised in the previous comment.

What all of these have in common, however, is that community members would help each other by creating posts that let them share their knowledge on the game, which has the potential to improve the game experience for other community members. As such, the community show much appreciation towards these guides and the people that put in time helping other people as shown in the following comments that replied to the post in the previous example:

"Nice, always good to have a reliable source to view mission reports." - Forum 1

"Very cool! Do you mind if I add this to my "useful EVE links" collection on my blog?" - Forum 1

On the flip side, another way of helping was identified through members directly asking for help with various problems they were not able to answer themselves as shown in the following posts:

"Hello Script community, I'm having some trouble with my script based UI. I'm looking to implement a few lines of code into my LUA file but whenever I put these in, the entire addon stops working and goes back to default layout. I'll leave the entire LUA file at the end of the topic to help locate the issue." - Forum 4

"I've just begun the exploration training exercises. Much more difficult than the military ones ... Any advice or help would be appreciated immensely" - Forum 1

These questions show that gaming communities ask a wide variety of questions that varied considerably, depending on the game, forum and even section that these were posted. It would seem that they, to some extent, create micro-communities inside existing communities and

moreover seem very confident in getting answers, discussions or direct help no matter the difficulty of the help that is needed. The two examples shown, are both particular questions aimed at different micro-communities within the game. The first comment, for example, is explicitly aimed at other community members that involve themselves with the creation scripts. Many community members are more than willing to help answering these questions as is shown in the following comment that was made in reply to question aimed at this script community:

"Hi Tzeeni, i have just been testing your script for 70 minutes-ish, and i didn't get the "Interface action failed because of an AddOn" message nor a misbehaving Target of Target frame. Do you use any other addons which might be the culprit?"
- Forum 4

Based on observed posts and comments, the empirical data portrays that helping other community members is a positive and welcoming behaviour that seems to be encouraged by the community as they receive a lot of supportive feedback. This was also shown in the fact that questions aimed at the community often had multiple people giving answers to these same questions, or at the very least attempted to do so. Furthermore, it was noticeable that no matter which platform was observed, member-generated guides, were visible and acknowledged. Initially, it would indicate high engagements and a level of trust that people are very active, knowledgeable and willing to help each other out if they are in need of it.

However, even if the questions were aimed towards community members, users did show appreciation whenever a company employee, answered the question instead. While community members were observed to be very appreciative of community answers, it seemed, as if that when company employees replied community members were often even more grateful. The post below, for example, shows a community member thanking a company employee for answering a question.

"Vrak - thanks for the answers, didn't want to quote because it looked like it was going to get messy" - Forum 4

"Fair enough, thank you so much for the helpful information!" - Forum 4

This shows that helping doesn't always necessarily always takes place intra-community. In fact, while the majority of questions were aimed mostly towards community members, this was not always the case, as is shown in the following example:

"Hi, I have been facing multiple problems after yesterday's maintenance ... Please, you guys need to check what wrong you did during the maintenance and fix that !"
- Forum 4

"Hi there Blizzard! How do I remove the non-blizzard games from the blizzard launcher?" - Forum 4

As seen in these posts, community members do, in fact, request help from company employees often as well. Most of the questions aimed towards company employees were observed to usually, but not always, involve problems that the community most likely would not be able to solve as it often has to do with issues with the game itself.

Helping is thus shown to be done in several ways one of which is through the sharing of expertise and knowledge. This wasn't the only thing that was shared within gaming communities, however, as is highlighted in the following posts:

"Hey guys, Made a video on what got me into WoW in the first place and I'm curious to find out different stories on the first inception you've experienced with WoW ..." - Forum 4

"Montage of some funny moments/people I have encountered while playing Fortnite ... A good friend of mine told me I should upload it here for feedback. Would appreciate any criticism or feedback" - Forum 2

These posts show examples of how gaming communities also frequently engage in the sharing of experiences with other members of the community. These experiences are often shared in the form of UGC, which is mostly seen in the form of video clips or full videos of people playing. Three key elements were discovered during the observations; either it was impressive, fun or interesting before it would be accepted and shared among the community members. These sorts of posts, often in the form of YouTube videos or short clips are commonly found on various Social Media or forums and showed very high levels of engagement, especially in the case of the first two key elements. As an example, one post with a video clip titled "I was wondering why my grenade didn't kill him...well here is why" (Third-Party Forum 3) achieved

46.000 upvotes. Upvoting refers to a person pressing a button to show they liked it. In relation to how value is co-created, sharing these types of videos would seem to have become an integral part of online gaming communities.

In addition to the sharing of knowledge, expertise and experiences there was another form of sharing that was observed:

"Mind you I haven't really played ... some information may be outdated, but it's a thread meant for discussion anyways, so I don't have to get everything right immediately ... Tell me what you think." - Forum 4

A member of the community replied with a comment, looking for an explanation:

"Mind outlining what circumstances make the talent good?" - Forum 4

The next reply was a further in-depth answer to how these things were defined, which is represented by this comment:

"First, you can combustion right after the ... Second, the crit-less builds were quite popular for a large part" - Forum 4

This pattern, in particular, showed how much of the interactions in online gaming communities also revolved around expressing and sharing of opinions. This was demonstrated in many variations including everything from short open-ended questions to long, in-depth posts with various elements to be discussed. The observations would further identify these discussions never to provide a final result but would go on for a long period, somewhat similar to how people engage in discussions in offline settings.

The nature of the discussion shown represents the majority of the observed discussions across multiple platforms, as it does not limit online discussions to superficial conversations with no real value. Furthermore, these discussions are not about saying yes or no but about arguing and explaining yourself. Although, discussions do also happen on more short and straightforward matters, where it is more about simple personal opinions or preference as shown by this post:

"Need opinions on med kits vs bandages. I find myself trying to decide which one would be better ... Tough decision in my opinion" - Forum 2

As mentioned above, the nature of these online discussions indicates that there is some value in being able to enter these online communities to discuss and share opinions about all kinds of matters. Furthermore, the length and commitment to each discussion vary a lot, but they seem critical to the community as they are able to express themselves for both the rest and the companies.

Additionally, one other type of post stood out. What most patterns had in common, sharing was the common denominator whether this was in the form of knowledge, expertise, experiences or opinions. However, as can be seen in the following example, this wasn't always the case:

"I want to share my creations with you and would love to receive your feedback, the materials i use are pretty cheap and weird :D as we don't have the fancy craft shops here. Most of my works are from World of Warcraft i try to make costumes by the series, hope you like them" - Forum 4

"[t]o celebrate Evesterdam's 5 year anniversary with a convention on the 4th and 5th of November! Tickets are now available via our website! We hope to see you there" - Forum 1

The final type of pattern to describe The Consumer is related to engagement outside of online platforms. It was interesting to see how an online game, driven by people playing and interacting online had become popular outside of the internet. It would prove that the communities would arrange events to happen in real life with each other, such as is shown in the second post above. Subsequently, artists from all different fields would spend their time on crafting various artistic, physical creations that would be linked to the game of their choosing. It varied a lot what kinds of events that were created for each community, some of the one identified were; the creation of physical fanart, the organisation of offline meetups and the creation and act of cosplaying. The latter ones refer to people dressing up as characters from pop-culture such as video game, movie or comic book characters.

To summarise how value is co-created in the online gaming communities, it was possible to categorise the findings into four patterns: (i) helping (ii) sharing experiences (iii) expressing and sharing of opinions and (iv) Offline engagement. Upon researching these communities, it was possible to identify multiple patterns that appeared in each community to various degrees. Thus, the communities do share commonalities as being presented in the four mentioned patterns.

Additionally, the predominant pattern of the research was sharing knowledge and helping each other, as those posts were frequent and highly viewed and commented on, across all observed communities. More specifically, guides on how to improve gameplay seem to be particularly popular as reflected by high levels of engagement. Through these four patterns, not only do gaming communities enhance the game experience but also collaboratively create value for each other, which might make people feel part of an active community.

4.2 Part 2: The Company

During the netnographic research, observations were also made on The Company perspective, which were recorded separately. The data aims at identifying how these companies facilitate value co-creation. Upon first observations, it was also possible to identify several patterns concerning how video game companies interacted with their respective communities, in order to enable value co-creation. The first example of this comes in the form of recognising community members effort that went into the creation of UGC:

"Someone on Reddit made a wallpaper cause he was bored so I decided to do the same. Feel free to use it if you wish!" - Forum 2

In response to this a Fortnite community manager replied, which shows how community managers try to become active and recognised members of the community, while simultaneously encouraging community members to create UGC by showing them recognition:

"Very cool! I'll need to get a Fortnite background on my phone." - Forum 2

This form of interaction, while not rare, was less frequent than the other way companies encouraged the creation of UGC. More commonly seen in the form of the company's official social media pages sharing UGC in official posts:

"There's banter and shenanigans abound as the Yogscast take Warcraft newcomers, food, on an Alliance vs Horde scavenger hunt around the Broken Isles!" - Forum 4

In this particular post a YouTube video created by the popular gaming-related YouTube channel, Yogscast, was shared (Yogscast, 2018). This shows that the company behind the game in question appreciates UGC and actively shows creations of its community. This becomes even

more apparent in the following example, where the official Facebook page actively allows and asks its community members to share their own World of Warcraft related creations:

"This gallery hosts your cosplays inspired by the Warcraft Universe. If you want your cosplay to be featured in this gallery, email photos of your creation to CMTeamEU-WoW@blizzard.com with the permission to publish them on our social media pages." - Social Media 4

Besides allowing community members to show off their own creations (in this case cosplay) on the official Facebook page, gaming companies also actively try to engage the community in sharing their personal game-related stories:

"Adventuring is always more fun with friends - even if things don't always go to plan! What are the funniest in-game stories from your guild?" - Social Media 4

"Tight Machariel solo PVP from Lussy Lou to warm up your Wednesday! What's the most solo kills you've gotten in a fight? (NPCs not included)" - Social Media 1

In some cases, companies attempt to encourage its community to create and share UGC through competitions, such as the following examples:

"Replay Royale Submit your highlights video on YouTube using #ReplayRoyale for a chance to win an Alienware Aurora PC package and more!" - Social Media 2

"Thank you for being with us through the good times and through the bad ...To mark the occasion, we have prepared a special event for you. PUBG One-year Anniversary Graffiti Competition ... How would you like to see your own art there instead? Well, now you can. Submit your PUBG-themed graffiti for a chance to be viewed by millions of players across the globe. Show us what you got!" - Forum 3

These examples show a pattern of how gaming companies are trying to keep their community engaged, by actively interacting with them and encouraging them to create UGC and thus co-creating value. However, besides engaging the community through active community interactions and the encouraging the creation of UGC, there is one other pattern that was identified that showed how video game companies co-create value with their communities:

"Hey folks, The new Triglavian content is available on Singularity for testing. ... If you experience anything you believe to be a bug with the new content, please submit a bug report from within the client F12 menu before restarting your client. We look forward to your feedback about this new content." - Forum 1

This comment shows how companies actively rely on feedback on their games from their communities to perfect their product offerings. Through this form of co-creation, video game companies and the gaming communities can create mutually beneficial relationships as by listening to feedback companies can continuously improve their games. Thus, keeping the communities satisfied with the game while simultaneously showing their communities that their feedback and opinions are valued and taken into consideration. This is further displayed by the following interaction between a player and a game developer:

"Just unlocked it on my 115 then I tried it on my 110 since you can its still pretty fun/great ... I hope in another build you guys will be able to scale the npc players to our level ..." - Forum 4

Company response:

"Found a solution to the AI scaling issue, doing some testing, and we'll probably push a fix early next week. Thanks for the report!" - Forum 4

Both these examples show that video game companies are actually listening and relying on feedback from its community and are actively acting and engaging with feedback; thus, continuously improving and updating their product while also validating its communities by showing that they are listening to and acting upon the communities wishes and complaints. Nevertheless, while feedback was appreciated and often incorporated it is not necessarily the case that they incorporate every and all feedback. This determined by the observation that companies only reply to posts with feedback very sparsely. This shows that they are careful in selecting the types of feedback to consider, especially considering that in the cases that they did reply it was observed to be done almost exclusively to; either inform the community that the issue had been fixed, or to thank the person providing the feedback and telling them that they would look into it. In the case of the latter the company usually, in their replies, refrained from promising that the feedback would be incorporated.

Finally, the last pattern identified differs from the patterns identified thus far. This pattern, instead of being observed in interactions, is seen in the forums of the video games themselves. During the research, it was observed that every forum dedicated to a video game had specific sub-forums dealing with much of what has been shown in this chapter so far. Every forum that was observed had sub-forums devoted to; player help, user creations (UGC), suggestions, bug-reports and tech support. In some cases, such as on the EVE Online and World of Warcraft forums, there were even official sub-forums dedicated to the creation and development of third-party applications (see Appendix C). This means that video game companies are aware of the types of discussions their communities have and thus use forums and sub-forums to facilitate and centralise these interactions as much as possible. This, in turn, allows companies to gain a better perspective into what is essential to the community at any given time and gives them the perfect platform to interact with their community to discuss these issues, ultimately leading to a co-creation of value.

Through these findings, three main patterns regarding how video game companies are enabling value co-creation were identified. Video game companies appear to facilitate value co-creation mainly through; (i) the encouragement and recognition of UGC, (ii) through the active integration of community feedback, (iii) through the creation of dedicated forums and sub-forums. The first two patterns have one thing in common, they both reward community members for being active members of their respective communities by giving members a sense of validation. In a similar vein to intra-community discussed as shown in Chapter 4.1, this validation from the side of the video game companies makes community members feel like they are relevant to the company. Particularly in the second pattern, the community is indeed very relevant to the company as without community feedback it would be harder for companies to update and perfect a video game. Not only does community feedback allow video game companies to perfect the game on which feedback is given, but this same feedback will allow video game companies to create even better products (games) in the future. The third pattern, the existence of various official forums and sub-forums, aids to facilitate and centralise a lot of these interactions (such as those presented in Chapter 4.1). In turn, this allows the companies to identify the needs of its communities better and, as mentioned earlier, gives them the perfect platform to interact and co-create value with their various communities.

While all of these methods vary in prominence in the interactions of the video game companies with their online gaming communities, and in the number of dedicated sub-forums, all of these patterns were observed to some extent in every online gaming community that was researched.

4.3 Summary of Findings

In this chapter, several patterns were identified based on initial decoding that were observed within the findings. Within Part 4.1: *The Consumer*, four patterns have been identified; (i) helping (ii) sharing experiences (iii) expressing and sharing of opinions and (iv) Offline engagement. Similarly, within Part 4.2: *The Company* three patterns have been identified; (i) encouragement and recognition of UGC, (ii) integration of community feedback and (iii) creation of dedicated forums and sub-forums. Some of these patterns, however, while interesting, are not all of equal relevance. Therefore, to answer research questions one and two, the patterns identified in this chapter have been re-coded into overarching patterns as presented in Table 6. The patterns are re-coded into patterns that are able to capture multiple elements of the empirical findings, thus help narrow down interesting findings that will be discussed in the following Chapter 5. This is particularly the case, for the patterns identified in Chapter 4.1: *The Consumer*, as some of the patterns there are relatively similar, for this reason only the most relevant patterns were selected during the focused re-coding process. The relevance was determined by how frequently these patterns were observed, but also on how well the patterns were determined to be able to answer the related research question. In the case of the patterns identified in Chapter 4.2: *The Company*, during the process of re-coding the data it was determined that all three of the patterns identified were equally relevant, as all three patterns highlight different ways of how companies facilitate value-co creation.

The findings presented in this chapter will further be analysed and discussed in the following chapter to help answer research question one and two. These results will then be linked together in order to identify *The Market*, which is related to the third and final research question (see also Table 6).

Table 6 Overarching patterns, focused re-coding

| Overarching Patterns <i>Focused re-coding</i> | The Consumer | The Company |
|---|--|---|
| 1 | Helping other community members | Integration of community feedback |
| 2 | Sharing expertise and knowledge with other members | Encouragement and recognition of UGC |
| 3 | | Creation of dedicated forums and sub-forums |

5 Analysis and Discussion

This chapter aims to provide an in-depth analysis and discussion of The Consumer: How do online gaming communities co-create value and The Company: How do gaming companies facilitate value co-creation. Through comparison and linking of the results to these questions, it is possible to conceptualise The Market: How do the mechanisms of both actors identify the market. The analysis and comparison are structured based on the conceptual framework of The Value Co-Creation Egg and is discussed in relation to existing theory.

5.1 The Consumer: How is value co-created within the gaming communities?

Based upon the empirical findings presented in Chapter 4.1, it was possible to identify two overarching patterns that both represent and show how value is co-created within the gaming communities, as presented in Chapter 4.3, Table 6: (i) Helping other community members (ii) Sharing expertise and knowledge with other members. These were the chosen patterns as they are able to capture multiple of the initial patterns discovered in Chapter 4.1. Therefore, some of the patterns are overlapping; thus, these re-focused patterns are able to condense some of the patterns into a single pattern that summarises multiple ones. Consequently, they were evaluated and compared in relation to other patterns and how well they can answer the research question.

5.1.1 Helping other community members

Based on the empirical findings a predominant pattern of helping other community members became clear. Throughout all of the platforms, these posts were highly viewed and common. Which indicates expected results of consumers looking for help from other members of the community, rather than from the company itself. For example:

"Hello guys, So here's the lowdown. A couple of years ago I decided I'd try WoW, and I loved my first experience ... My question is: ... Am I ready?" – Forum 4

The discussion that the above post appeared in, is an excellent example of how community members help each other as shown in the following reply:

"Not ready for Antorus, normal difficulty ... Also, grinding arganite, killing Argus rare elites, opening Argus chests all increase the chance of getting legendary and having the right legendaries is critical for raiding. You really are at the bottom of the ladder right now. It will take a lot of work to climb it." - Forum 4

Building on the Hennig-Thurgau, Hofacker and Bloching (2013), who argue a shift in movement from bowling to pinball interactions would indicate that people in nature are not looking for answers through the company but from each other. Thus, validating that consumers are becoming more connected, informed and empowered. This became evident in several of the posts and comments, where questions were aimed at other community members, such as:

"I've just begun the exploration training exercises. Much more difficult than the military ones ... Any advice or help would be appreciated immensely" - Forum 1

"Hey all,... Can someone read my logs and tell me what I'm doing wrong? Are my legendary Items a mismatch with my talents?" - Forum 4

Although, Hennig-Thurgau, Hofacker and Bloching (2013) state that consumers are no longer looking for information from the company the empirical data, this observation, to some extent contradicts this statement regarding online gaming communities. People helping each other and asking for help, are mostly doing it on the company's website and thus very much appreciate if company employees respond to their posts. This is represented by these examples of an employee by the name of 'Vrak' helping a member:

"Vrak - thanks for the answers, didn't want to quote because it looked like it was going to get messy" - Forum 4

"Fair enough, thank you so much for the helpful information!" - Forum 4

This form of appreciation is according to the empirical findings more common when the company is replying rather than other members of the community. Therefore, there appears to be a higher level of appreciation towards company replies. All in all, Hennig-Thurgau, Hofacker and Bloching's (2013) theory of people no longer looking for information from the company is surprisingly not entirely applicable to online gaming communities, as the observations indicate,

at times members prefer to interact with the company rather than other community members. The following post shows an example of this:

"Hi, I have been facing multiple problems after yesterday's maintenance ... Please, you guys need to check what wrong you did during the maintenance and fix that !"
- Forum 4

Consequently, it was not expected that members of the community use the platforms to not only get in contact with each other but also to get in touch with the company, as there is no guarantee of a response from the company.

5.1.2 Sharing expertise and knowledge with other members

The empirical findings were further able to identify the second overarching pattern of sharing expertise and knowledge with other members. This pattern was defined as members were observed to frequently create posts and comments of them sharing their expertise or knowledge as shown by the following examples:

"Since it's a frequently asked question on these boards, I've thrown together a quick guide for how to pick a server." - Forum 4

"I put together an in-depth video that explains exactly how to Ramp Rush your opponent like a pro! Hope it helps!" - Forum 2

These posts show how sharing knowledge was often done through the creation or sharing of guides. Guides were frequently observed on almost all of the platforms observed, especially in relation to creating posts and UGC. This came as a surprise to the researchers how these guides were dominant in all platforms and the frequency of which they were shown. Labrecque et al. (2013) discuss the theory of eWOM and help explain why people are voluntarily sharing their knowledge and expertise online. They argue that consumer empowerment, the internet and web 2.0 have provided consumers with access to all sorts of information. Consequently, people are looking for information and in principle, where there is demand there is going to be supply (Marshall, 1920; Prasch, 2008). Thus, it would indicate the desire for information from outside the company came with the web 2.0 and so did the supply of UGC, sharing knowledge and expertise. The following statements are examples of how people are asking the community for

information and how the community is sharing their knowledge and expertise with the rest of the community.

"Hello , im still using the guns i got from the special founders edition ... what kind of weapons would you recommend to use ?" - Forum 2

The following comment that expressed how a member shared personal knowledge and expertise

"Assault is mainly grave digger, hydra and razor blade. May be others but I don't use them as far as I remember. I've heard great things about the room sweeper, so you could use that as a shotgun" - Forum 2

This indicates that eWOM, which is discussed in relation to social media by authors like Goodrich and Mooji (2014), is also applicable to online gaming communities on social media and other platforms. Consequently, the research is able to build upon the existing literature of eWOM by finding empirical evidence of similar interactions and behaviour. Although the researchers did expect dialogues between the communities it, the high level of engagement and how active they are at sharing their knowledge with each other, was not.

Alba and Hutchinson (1987) discussed why consumers utilise their consumption to demonstrate knowledge and expertise. Other authors have further elaborated and linked this behaviour too; representing an identity (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2010) and with the purpose of forming social networks (Holt, 1995). Even though these articles were not written with online communities in mind, they are able to capture some of the perspectives to why people are sharing expertise and knowledge. The concept of UGC seems to be weighted heavily when it comes to sharing and confirms Banks and Potts (2010) theory of it being impactful in the gaming industry. Consequently, it was also possible to verify that members of the community do utilise their consumption (through playing the game) to demonstrate knowledge and expertise.

To summarise how consumers, co-create value, two patterns have been determined as shown in Chapter 4.3, Table 6. Thus, the patterns are unavoidable when determining how value is co-created for consumers. The consumers co-create value by interacting with each other on various levels, while some being more dominant than others; helping each other and sharing content. Firstly, helping each other was one of the more dominant patterns and support, to some extent, Hennig-Thurau, Hofacker and Bloching (2013) theory of pinball-like interactions. Secondly, to

facilitate the experience of a game, the consumers would often interact through UGC, which is able to build upon the discussion of eWOM from Goodrich and Mooji (2014) by observing similar behaviour to eWOM in these online gaming communities. Both of these patterns have the sharing of UGC in common, as both helping and the sharing of knowledge and expertise is often done through the creation and sharing of UGC. All in all, the most surprising of the observations was how active these communities are in helping each other but also in sharing knowledge and expertise.

5.2 The Company: How do video game companies facilitate value co-creation?

The empirical findings in chapter 4.2 also allowed for the identification of three overarching patterns in relation to how video game companies facilitate value co-creation as presented in Chapter 4.3, Table 6: (i) Incorporating player feedback (ii) Encouragement and recognition toward UGC (iii) Creation of dedicated sub-forums. These patterns include all of the patterns that were identified in Chapter 4.2, the reason being that they were determined to all play an equal role in the answering of this question.

5.2.1 Incorporating player feedback

One of the patterns identified in Chapter 4.2 was the active incorporation of player feedback. This was determined through replies of the companies on posts of community members providing feedback. As well as through posts of the companies actively asking community members to assist in testing and by providing feedback on the game or other related content. The former can be seen in the following interaction between a community member and a developer:

"Was able to Queue up for the scenario but was disconnected from server (solo join) alliance side about 15 seconds after getting in. Logging back in has me stuck with a loading bar 75%" - Forum 4

Company response:

"We believe the issue causing disconnects has been resolved; please let us know if you're still experiencing issues!" - Forum 4

This coincides with what Labrecque et al. (2013) mention in their paper that people's desire for self-expression and increasing power has led to consumers increasingly using feedback mechanisms. While Labrecque et al. (2013) only mention this taking place through the creation of personal websites, blogs, podcasts and online videos. The above interaction shows that consumers use more direct feedback mechanisms as well, which in this case is done in the form of a post on the official forum of a game. Traditionally, companies did not have to deal with these kinds of messages as the communication flow used to be a one-way direction (Hennig-Thurau, Hofacker & Bloching, 2013). The above observation, however, exemplifies that this is no longer the case and shows how video game companies are listening to their consumers. This supports the ideas of Ernst and Young (2011), who argue that understanding and listening to consumers is crucial to value co-creation.

Considering the rise of the internet and web 2.0, however, this wasn't too much of a surprise as web 2.0 has made it much easier for customers to voice their concerns through countless of outlets, forums are just one of these outlets. Furthermore, this interaction between consumer and company is also an example of value-in-use as discussed by Vargo and Lusch (2004), as value is created for this consumer in this particular example by playing the game, giving feedback and the company integrating this feedback in turn. While this above interaction shows the company reply to a consumer, the following observation exemplifies how gaming companies understand the importance of listening to consumers even further:

"Hey folks, The new Triglavian content is available on Singularity for testing ... If you experience anything you believe to be a bug with the new content, please submit a bug report from within the client F12 menu before restarting your client. We look forward to your feedback about this new content." - Social media 1

This shows how companies are actively asking consumers for feedback and are thus trying to collaborate with their communities. The example thus also exemplifies that how gaming companies ask feedback on specific aspects of the game and by doing so, they are able to set boundaries. Within these boundaries consumers can actively participate, creating a joint process (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). This, in turn, allows gaming companies to continuously

improve their products which supports LaSalle and Britton's (2003) argument that when this is the case, value co-creation runs deep within a company as consumer feedback is shown to actively affect various decision processes within the company.

Considering that it is ultimately the community that will end up playing the game it's fair to argue that it makes sense to involve gaming communities to some extent as they will better be able to tell what is good and enjoyable about a game than the company would be able to. Nevertheless, by setting boundaries gaming companies also show that they won't necessarily adhere to everything consumers want, which supports Prahalad and Ramaswamy's (2004) argument that to truly co-create value one should not treat its customers asking and listen to whatever they say. This is supported by observations that gaming companies usually refrained from making promises in their interactions with the community. Which in turn does imply that gaming companies don't necessarily treat their customers like kings, as not everything the community provides feedback on is incorporated. This is also because of the observations made which showed that most of the posts containing feedback were usually not even replied to. Yet, when this did happen, the companies usually refrained from making any promises. This isn't too surprising, however, as it would be challenging to reply to everyone considering the volume of feedback gaming companies receive on a daily basis.

Furthermore, one could only imagine what would happen if every bit of feedback would be incorporated, this would likely lead to the game turning into a complete mess as different consumers want and expect different things from a video game. This alone makes this virtually impossible to do in the first place as different community members might have completely contradicting opinions of what they want to see implemented. It, therefore, makes sense for gaming companies to create boundaries as it works in the interest of both the company and the consumers.

5.2.2 Encouragement and recognition of user-generated content

Another interesting pattern that was identified was seen in how gaming companies are actively encouraging the creation of UGC and giving recognition to community members that create UGC. Throughout the different platforms, this was observed to be done to very similar degrees. Whether this was done by replying to UGC of community members or, more commonly, through a post of the company themselves. Through these posts companies are actively promoting UGC by sharing UGC of community members as shown in the examples below:

"TSMViss making it look easy. #WinnerWinnerChickenDinner..." - Social media
3

"Here's a fun video of Wingnutcros diving head first into a pile of Brave pilots on his stream. Wingnut is one of the new regular streamers on the CCP Twitch channel" - Social media 1

"This gallery hosts your cosplays inspired by the Warcraft Universe. If you want your cosplay to be featured in this gallery, email photos of your creation to CMTeamEU-WoW@blizzard.com with the permission to publish them on our social media pages." - Social media 4

These examples show how video game companies, have recognised that consumers have their own values and thus companies carefully choose which values to push forward and are realising that consumers are willing to share their stories in collaboration with them (Pongsakornrungsilp & Schroeder, 2011). In the second example, a well-known community member is even allowed to live stream on the company's official live stream page. In the third example, the company informs cosplayers that they can be displayed on the company's social media page, with dozens of community members being already displayed there.

The observations made, support Hennig-Thurau, Hofacker & Bloching's (2013) suggestion towards the movement of more pinball-like interactions where companies lose control of information/content they forward as bounces back and forth through the internet and gets altered along the way. However, the empirical findings add to this by showing how video game companies have realised the power of eWOM and have started to leverage it to their advantage by deliberately allowing this pinball effect to take place by encouraging their community to create UGC with their content. By using UGC, gaming companies are able to generate awareness for free, as community members create UGC voluntarily and don't expect a reward in the first place and would, most likely, only be honoured if their UGC were to be featured on an official platform of the game the content was based on.

5.2.3 Creation of dedicated forums and sub-forums

The last and final pattern identified, differs from all the other in that it is not seen in the interactions or messaging of the company. Instead, as mentioned in Chapter 4.2, it is observed

through the existence of topic-specific official forums and sub-forums. The majority of observed forums were seen to have dedicated sub-forums which clearly show that video game companies are actively trying to integrate co-creation through the facilitation of dialogues. This is supported by the DART model, as according to this model, dialogue is one of the cornerstones to enable deeper integration of value co-creation (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). For example, every forum has a sub-forum where; new members can ask questions, leave suggestions and feedback/report bugs, share UGC in the form of visual or written content, and in some cases even have sub-forums where the community can discuss the development of third-party applications (see Appendix C).

These topics of these sub-forums reflect many of the patterns that were identified in this study, with each pattern indicating a form of value co-creation. This was a fascinating discovery as initially it was expected to be only able to identify how companies co-create value through their interactions. The existence of these forums and sub-forums however, adds another dimension as it shows that not only do gaming companies interact with their communities with co-creation in mind. As they appear to be actively facilitating these sorts of interactions to take place on their terms.

Similar to the pattern (i) incorporation of player feedback, the existence of dedicated sub-forums shows how video game companies recognise that consumers no longer belong at the end of the value chain and that its community plays a vital role in the creation of value as (Gabriel & Lang, 2008). One issue these authors mention however is that consumers can act unpredictable and inconsistent, even with efforts to control to constrain them. However, the creation of forums and sub-forums is one-way video game companies are trying to tackle these challenges. While video game companies might not be able to restrain its community, by creating the platform for these discussions themselves, they are arguably able to exercise greater control as they own the platforms on which many interactions within the community take place. The creation of these sub-forums, by the companies themselves, is arguably another way to actively set boundaries as mentioned earlier. One could interpret this as being a way companies only allow community members to participate within predetermined sub-forums.

What all of these patterns have in common is that they all revolve around interactions, or as by Prahalad & Ramaswamy (2004) would call it; Dialogue. It is through dialogue that companies are able to co-create value with consumers. Dialogue means more than just listening to your community "it implies shared learning and communication between two equal problem solvers"

(Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004 p.6). Through dialogue, companies cannot also create but also maintain loyal communities. This is clearly shown in many of the empirical findings with community members volunteering to provide feedback, create UGC and help other players without expecting any reward for it in return.

Dialogue is part of the DART model created by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004), so it makes sense to then also consider the other components that make up this model. Companies that genuinely put co-creation at their core are said to consider several other aspects. However, in this sense gaming companies do not necessarily appear to implement the other building blocks to a similar degree as Dialogue. Concerning Access, while gaming companies do give its community access to specific processes, such as new content tests, in general, that is as much access as gaming companies provide by themselves. The degrees of access also seem to heavily vary amongst gaming companies, as some companies observed do allow for the creation of third-party applications and even provide the tools to create them.

However, others do not. Risk assessment also seems to be not a significant consideration for gaming companies as, while they do try to incorporate customer feedback, the companies themselves ultimately decide which feedback to integrate or not, leaving the final responsibility with the company. And finally, when looking at transparency, from what can be seen in the empirical findings, gaming companies are surprisingly not very transparent at all. When retaking the example of feedback integration, gaming companies do not appear to actively tell consumers what feedback will be considered. This means that consumers will only find out what has been heard until after it has been integrated. This might also be because of the gaming industry environment, with many gaming companies tending to keep their development processes secret until the moment that they feel comfortable to announce something, which makes sense considering the high development costs of video games (Le Diberder 2012; Schreier, 2018; van Lent 2008).

To answer the question, how gaming companies facilitate value co-creation, as it stands, there is not one single way that gaming companies do this. The observations made show that gaming companies mainly facilitate value co-creation through the (i) integration of consumer feedback and through the (ii) encouragement of UGC, both of which methods, in turn, are partially facilitated through (iii) the creation of official dedicated forums and sub-forums. On these forums many of the interactions amongst consumers and between the consumers and the companies take place. It is through these interactions on these forums and other social platforms

that gaming companies are able to have good dialogue with their communities, which allows them to better understand and listen to consumers and are thus able to incorporate feedback better.

Having recognised the power of eWOM video game companies are also using these same platforms to encourage the creation of UGC and to recognise efforts of community members that actively create UGC. All in all, it was surprising to see how important dialogue is in the co-creation of value for gaming companies; that is, if they do not continually partake in these dialogues, co-creation of value would not be nearly as possible.

5.3 The Market: How do the mechanisms of both actors identify the market?

By looking at The Consumer and The Company (as shown in Figure 2), it is possible to answer the two first research questions as shown at the beginning of this thesis. However, it is also necessary to link the results of the analysis together, in order to fully understand how value co-creation is generated in The Market. Thus, the researchers looked for commonalities between the two answered research questions and used existing literature to help understand it.

By identifying ways, online gaming communities co-create value (The Consumer) and how gaming companies facilitate co-creation (The Company) it was possible to identify two commonalities between the actors, as presented in Figure 2. These are: (i) Dialogue and (ii) User-generated Content. Based upon the analysis, to a certain extent it was not expected how important dialogue would be; that is, it acts as the main building block for value co-creation in the gaming industry. Not only from the perspective of the company but also within gaming communities as shown in the reliance on intra-community interactions. Thus, it becomes evident when identifying the mechanisms of The Market, that dialogues play a central role. The enabling and creation of UGC is a highly engaging way for both actors to have a meaningful dialogue. Thus, it was surprising to see the interconnectivity between these two and how dependable they are of each other; that is, it would seem that without UGC dialogues within the gaming industry would appear to be much less engaging.

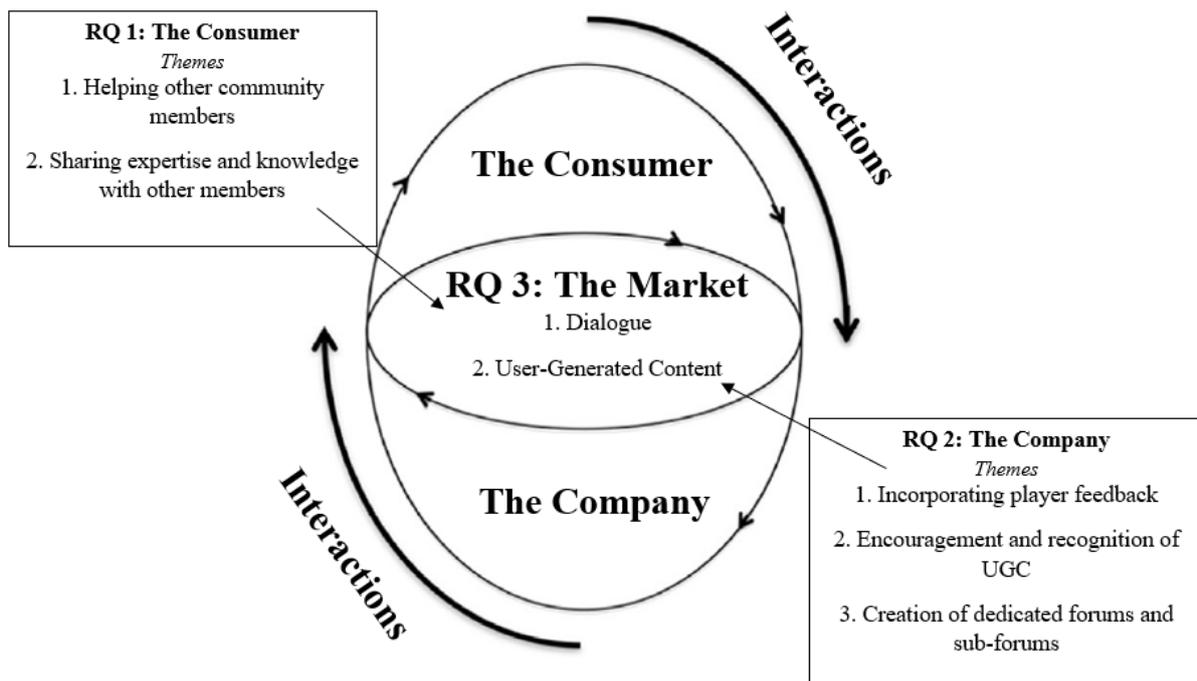


Figure 2 Patterns for each actor linked together and presented

Pongsakornrunsilp and Schroeder (2011) discuss the transition from merely telling stories to sharing, and that is also presented in these two commonalities. They explain this transition and emphasise the importance of dialogue and interactions between consumers and companies, which correlates with the results found during this research. This is shown in the empirical through interactions between findings gaming companies and communities, which ultimately lead to collaboratively producing and sharing of content. This is all possible due to a constant dialogue between the two actors, as according to Pongsakornrunsilp and Schroeder (2011) this is fundamental for value co-creation. Furthermore, they state that these interactions are a never-ending process that continually affects those involved, which correlates with the analysis.

Gabriel and Lang, 2008 propose that value co-creation can be a challenge for companies as consumers can act unpredictable and inconsistent making them harder to control. However, according to Arnould and Price (2000), consumers can, to an extent, be controlled by understanding what gives value to the consumers. In the case of this research, it is understood by the gaming companies that constant dialogue and UGC is what gives great value to the consumers but also themselves. Although, the companies are still not able to control what UGC that is being produced or for what purpose. Thus, Arnould and Price's (2000) argumentation of

understanding what gives value to consumers will make them more controllable, is not entirely applicable in the case of gaming industries as there is so much content being produced on a daily basis.

To answer the research question of how the mechanisms of both actors identify the market, the two most dominant commonalities are determined to be: Dialogues and UGC. Through dialogues, gaming companies can understand what gives value to them, while also allowing consumers to influence their decision-making processes. This, in turn, will enable companies and consumers to collaborate in various ways, which has also led to the emergence of UGC. As mentioned by Banks and Potts (2010) UGC is one way for consumers to utilise their consumption; that is, that consumers have started to shift towards becoming producers of value themselves. Therefore, value co-creation enables companies to interact with consumers in new ways. With the cost of producing high-quality video games being higher than ever, minimising risk has never been more critical (van Lent, 2008; Le Diberder, 2012). By incorporating consumers into the development process, it can be argued that companies can reduce the risk of producing something that the community dislikes. Thus, one could say that value co-creation is a way for gaming companies to minimise the risks that come along with the high development costs of video games and the high price of such projects failing as mentioned by van Lent (2008) and Le Diberder (2012).

6 Conclusion

The conclusion chapter summarises the key findings and links them to the study's aim and purpose. Furthermore, it presents the main contributions, points out managerial implications as well as further research directions.

6.1 Research Aim and Objective

The primary objective was to do an explorative study with the aim of generating a broader insight into how value is co-created within the gaming industry. Thus, the study sets out to assess the functions of how The Consumers co-create value in online gaming communities and how The Company facilitates value co-creation, while ultimately how these mechanisms affect The Market. This was done by utilising The Value Co-Creation Egg as a framework throughout this research. The presented study attempted at understanding value co-creation from the perspective of the gaming industry. Reason being, there is a current research gap between existing literature on value co-creation and value co-creation within the gaming industry; that is, despite the reliance on value co-creation within this industry. The purpose of the research was to answer the proposed research questions using a qualitative approach and using netnography as the data collection method. By taking this approach, it was possible to discover meaning rather than numbers (Braund and Clarke, 2013). For an explorative study, this was crucial, as these meanings will be able to form the foundation for the execution of more conclusive future research within the topic.

Within the context of The Consumer, the main findings revolved around the patterns of (i) helping other members and (ii) sharing expertise and knowledge. While these two were to an extent connected, the research was able to determine the importance of each of them separately. Reason being, the mechanisms of the consumers were driven by slightly different intentions as some consumers merely tried to help, while others voluntarily shared their expertise and knowledge without anyone asking for it. In the case of The Company, the findings showed how (i) the incorporation of player feedback, (ii) the encouragement and recognition of UGC and

(iii) the creation of dedicated forums and sub-forums all played crucial roles in the co-creation of value. The commonality between these patterns demonstrates the importance of dialogue for gaming companies as it is through dialogue that these mechanisms can take place.

After identifying the mechanisms of both of these actors, it was possible to find commonalities on how they affect The Market. The two main commonalities were: (i) Dialogues and (ii) UGC. It would further prove that dialogue is the primary building block of value co-creation and is commonly done by UGC within the gaming industry.

In contrast to the existing literature, there were a few differences between how value co-creation is currently understood and how it functions within the gaming industry. For example, Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) argue that all four elements of the DART model are essential if co-creation is to be accepted within the heart of a business. However, within the gaming industry, the emphasis seems to mostly lie on dialogue, with some of the other elements appearing to be much less thought off. Considering how much the gaming industry attempts to co-create value through dialogues and UGC, it would appear that co-creation is at the heart of much of what they do. This is despite the fact that the other elements of this model seemed to be of less importance and integrated within the gaming industry.

6.2 Theoretical Contributions

This is the first study, to our knowledge, to examine the mechanisms and impact of value co-creation for each actor and the market of the gaming industry. Although, very few other articles talk about the gaming industry (Arkaji & Lang, 2007; Luo, Zhang & Liu, 2015) they do not capture the mechanisms and the effects.

Although this study was conducted in one setting, the results and especially The Value Co-Creation Egg are applicable to other areas and games within the gaming industry. Thus, the findings suggest that this approach would also be beneficial for other gaming companies or scholars to understand the industry.

These findings can contribute considerably to the development of literature on the gaming industry. Firstly, as the paper is able to provide a framework called The Value Co-Creation Egg, which is possible to carry over to other research when investigating the gaming industry

and its actors. Secondly, the study contributes by expanding the understanding of value co-creation within the context of the gaming industry. Thirdly, the research is able to add to the existing knowledge of consumer and company interactions by identifying how they operate on the market, within the gaming industry; that is, with the emergence of consumer empowerment, online interactions can be further researched, and so this paper can act as a stepping stone to understanding such.

6.3 Practical Implications

The results are also of direct practical relevance, as gaming companies and other marketers who wish to understand the mechanism in the gaming industry can use the findings of the research to support how The Market is functioning as of now. Thus, the study proposes four steps for gaming companies or other marketers to consider when engaging with value co-creation in the gaming industry: (i) Dialogues are of importance by encouraging the consumers to partake in interactions (ii) these interactions are very focused around UGC thus, the research recommends encouragement and recognition of UGC (iii) understand what parts of the game creates the most value for the consumer, making it easier to encourage and control the direction of UGC (iv) creation of relevant platforms that lets consumers and the companies engage in meaningful dialogue in a semi-controlled environment.

6.4 Future Research

The study also reinforces the recommendation for further investigation of the gaming industry, more specifically the actors within. As there is currently very limited literature linking the gaming industry with general theories thus, it can become easier to understand the behaviours and interactions if further research is conducted. While Labrecque et al. (2013) explain that people share and create content such as UGC to gain reputation and influence, the motivations behind companies' engagement in co-creation are unknown. Therefore, this is another area that should be explored, as it can reveal underlying behavioural patterns that can be conceptualised.

Future more extensive studies with statistical analysis of how many consumers who either like or play the game because of UGC, would be of interest. Reason being, it would be able to show

the impact UGC has, as this study is only able to observe the importance of it. More research of other games in this area is necessary before it is possible to generalise the findings across the entire gaming industry. For example, this study only focuses on gaming companies and gaming communities that predominantly create online multiplayer games. Future research should therefore also include companies or communities of single-player games. Furthermore, the communities studied were mostly situated around PC and Console games. It would therefore also be interesting to look into gaming communities located around other platforms, such as communities situated around mobile phone gaming.

Several questions remain to be resolved; (i) in particular the underlying reasons for consumers to engage in the creation of UGC, as this study is not able to identify the underlying behaviour of the mechanism and (ii) how companies are able to control the content that is produced by the consumer.

The internet has brought forth an era of constant change, change that some might be uncomfortable with. For example, many people do not recognise eSports as an official sport. However, with the number of people engaging in the playing of video games increasing continuously, at some point the popularity of eSports might surpass that of even football. Drastic shifts such as this seem to be becoming increasingly frequent, and as such, companies need to be constantly aware of what is happening in the marketplace. By increasingly engaging in dialogue with consumers, and by doing so co-creating value, companies might be able to not only create products consumers want but will also be better equipped to deal with such drastic shifts. Even if one of these shifts entail us spending more and more time in the virtual world. How would that leave the physical world we live in today?

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Appendix A: Fornite Dance Contest

100 Winners, One Grand Prize. Show us your dance moves and claim Victory Royale! #boogiedown

ALL 100 WINNERS GET THE FORTNITE FEVER SET

#BOOGIEDOWN PRIZES

| Rank | Prizes |
|------|--|
| 1 | 10,000 V-BUCKS, IRL BOOGIE BOMB, YOUR DANCE CREATED IN FORTNITE AS AN EMOTE! |
| 2-5 | 10,000 V-BUCKS, IRL BOOGIE BOMB |
| 6-10 | 10,000 V-BUCKS |

👍👎❤️ 986 532 Comments 126 Shares

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/FortniteGame/photos/a.220071048070227.53938.209696469107685/1884022958341686/?type=3>

Appendix C: Example of Forums / Sub-forums

GAMEPLAY AND GUIDES

| | | |
|---|---|--|
|  New Player Help and Guides New to the World of Warcraft? Ask questions from experienced players and learn more about the |  Returning Player Help and Discussion Returning to Azeroth after some time away? Welcome back! Post here to talk about what's happened |  Quests Discussion forum for the many World of Warcraft Quests. |
|  Professions Discussion forum for the many World of Warcraft Professions. |  Pet Battles Discuss Pet Battles in World of Warcraft. |  Dungeons, Raids and Scenarios Discuss the Dungeons, Raids and Scenarios of World of Warcraft. |
|  Transmogrification Discuss the fine art of making your gear look different than it used to. |  Achievements Discussion forum for World of Warcraft Achievements |  UI and Macro Work with other players to create your own special custom interfaces and macros. |
|  Customer Support Blizzard Support Agent moderated forum to discuss and inquire about in-game and account related |  Service Status [®] Collection of important messages regarding the status of services, such as issues relating to realms. |  Technical Support For problems installing or patching World of Warcraft, connecting to the realms or crashing during |
|  Mac Technical Support For problems installing or patching World of Warcraft, connecting to the realms or crashing while using |  Bug Report Found a bug in the game? Help us squash it by reporting it here! | |

IN DEVELOPMENT

| | | |
|--|--|--|
|  Battle for Azeroth Beta General Discussion Post feedback on general issues raised in testing the Battle for Azeroth Beta |  Battle for Azeroth Beta Bug Report Submit bugs encountered while testing the Battle for Azeroth Beta |  Battle for Azeroth Beta Zones and Leveling Feedback and discussion about BFA zones and leveling goes here. |
|  BFA Dungeons, Island Expeditions, and Raids Feedback and discussion about group content in BFA goes here. |  Battle for Azeroth Items and Classes Discussion and feedback about items, itemization, and their impact on class specializations |  Battle for Azeroth Warmode and PvP Discussion and feedback on all player-versus-player activities in Battle for Azeroth goes here. |
|  Legion Class Development Discuss class design in Legion | | |

WEBSITE AND MOBILE FEEDBACK

| | |
|--|---|
|  Website Bug Report Report any World of Warcraft Community website bugs here. |  Mobile Bug Report Report any Blizzard Mobile App bugs here. |
|--|---|

Source: <https://us.battle.net/forums/en/wow/>

EVE ONLINE Log in Dev Posts 🔍 ☰

Marketplace 225 / week WTS Rorq/JF/Refiner 50msp 17m

Buying? Selling? Looking to trade? Post here.

■ Sales Ads ■ Buy Ads ■ Trade Ads ■ Auctions ■ Price Checks
■ Character Bazaar ■ Services ■ Market Discussions

SELLING - ME - 6M Starter 20m
WTS rorq polit JACK TTTT 20m

Corporations & Alliances 69 / week Looking For A Corp? One Read, That's All I Ask [Two Steps From Hell][GT-FKD] High/Low/WH - PVP/PVE - Highly Active 17m

The place to discuss Corporations, Alliances & Recruitment.

■ Recruitment Center ■ Corporation & Alliance Discussion
■ Mercenary Services

[0.0][PVP/PVE] Miners, Ratters with Teeth Read on! 23m
92m sp PVP pilot looking to come back into the fold 40m

Events 4 / week PushX Elephant Race! May 27th at 18:00. Get your elephants ready! 17h

This is the place of the forums to discuss both in and out of game events.

■ In Game Events ■ Out Of Game Events

Any Eve Players in Missouri? 1d
Orlando meet with CCP Guard and CCP Curtis! - May 31 1d

Council Of Stellar Management 5 / week Silver Suspiria [FEDUP-XO] for CSM 13 3h

This is the place to discuss all things CSM.

■ Assembly Hall ■ Jita Park ■ CSM Campaigns

High Sec Candidate 6h
Creecher Virpio for CSM 13! 19h

EVE Technology and Research Center 45 / week Please re-introduce the ability to punch through the last half of structure. It was fun! 7 4m

The place to discuss all testing and test server content.

■ Upcoming Features & Changes ■ Player Features & Ideas
■ Test Server Feedback ■ Forum Feedback & Requests
■ Third Party Developers ■ Linux ■ Mac OS ■ EVE Launcher

EVE Mon 4.0 BETA - Under New Ownership - Conversion for ESI 33m
Abyssal Deadspace now live on Singularity for testing 1h

Issues, Workarounds & Localization 17 / week Mac Skill Planner 1h

The place for questions and help from your fellow eve players and devs alike.

■ General Issues ■ Mac Issues ■ EVE Launcher

Drifter Wormholes Broken 8h
Linking Chat Channels (Old Way NOT Working) (t. EDITED: It's Easy) 17h

Форумы на русском языке 5 / week X-Files corporation! DONT JOIN!(Rus) 8h

Раздел форума для общения русскоязычных пилотов.

■ Миссии ■ Торговля ■ PvP ■ PvE ■ Новички ■ Вопросы

Корпорация [Russian Federation co] ищет новых пилотов 9h

Category Topics Latest

EVE Information Portal 2 / week Dev blog: Abyssal Deadspace - What Lies Beyond The Filament 10m

The place for links to all the latest information about EVE Online.

■ Dev Blogs ■ Announcements ■ Community Fittings

Dev Blog: Alliance Tournament 2018 - Rules and Sign-Ups 3h
Dev Blog: Security: Different times - Different ways 9h

New Citizens Q&A 20 / week Buddy invites and rewards from other players 10h

The place for new pilots to ask questions and get assistance.

New Tutorial Feedback/Comments 4d
8 Golden Rules for EVE Online 5d

Communications Center 65 / week Allow alphas to train select omega skills with PLEX 2m

The place for general discussions about EVE Online.

■ General Discussion ■ Crime & Punishment ■ Out Of Pod Experience
■ My EVE ■ Skill Discussion

The like and get likes thread II 37m
Project Nova Survey feedback 6m

Fiction Portal 11 / week Announcement: Shrine to a Caldari Hero Operational 1m

The place to discuss the lore of New Eden, and post in character.

■ Intergalactic Summit ■ EVE Lore Discussion ■ Player Fiction

Loneliness 2h
Off-Topic Thread 16h

PvP Gameplay Center 8 / week EFT (Eve Fitting Tool) for May 2018 41m

The place to post and read about all things PVP.

■ PvP Ships & Modules ■ Warfare & Tactics ■ Tournament Discussion

Pyfa - The Python Fitting Assistant 2h
Feeder round rules clarification please CCP 12h

PvE Gameplay Center 15 / week SoE epic arc 4h

The place to post and read about all things PVE.

■ PvE Ships & Modules ■ Missions

Confessor - DED & Missions 4h
Praxis 6h

Source: <https://forums.eveonline.com/>