ONLINE GAMING COMMUNITIES: A VIRTUAL ETHNOGRAPHY OF
STARCAST II

by

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Online Gaming Communities: A Virtual Ethnography of StarCraft II

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at George Mason University

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Fairfax, VA
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DEDICATION

For Gershwin.
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Defense of the Agents ........................................................................................................ DotA
League of Legends ............................................................................................................ LoL
massively multiplayer online games .............................................................................. MMOGs
massively multiplayer online role-playing game ......................................................... MMORPG
multiplayer online battle arena ....................................................................................... MOBA
real-time strategy ........................................................................................................... RTS
Second Life ................................................................................................................... SL
StarCraft franchise ......................................................................................................... SC
StarCraft I ...................................................................................................................... SC1
StarCraft II .................................................................................................................... SC2
StarCraft II World Championship Series .................................................................... WCS
Warcraft III .................................................................................................................. WC3
World of Warcraft ........................................................................................................ WowW
ABSTRACT

ONLINE GAMING COMMUNITIES: A VIRTUAL ETHNOGRAPHY OF STARCAST II

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George Mason University, 2015

Director: Dr. Cortney Hughes Rinker

This thesis follows a group of gamers who regularly play StarCraft II together, and explores how gaming communities are created, sustained, and dissolved in cyberspace. Offered first is an introduction to the StarCraft franchise, websites dedicated to custom content creation, and the unique technical requirements of online gaming. Next, arcade maps and StarCraft II as an eSport are specifically investigated to demonstrate how content creators and professional players are key to the sustainability of online games. Finally, examples of cultural and technological catalysts of and barriers to community building are provided, with an extended focus on national cultures, the relationship between consumers and producers, and the permeability of online communities. Using primarily qualitative methods, including participant observation, interviews, and textual analysis, this research illustrates how online gaming communities are both inclusionary and exclusionary, homogenous and diverse, but ultimately constrained by the limitations of modern technology and the actions of game producers and developers.
CHAPTER ONE: AN INTRODUCTION TO SC2 AND ONLINE GAMING

According to Michael D. Gallagher, president and CEO of the Entertainment Software Association, “Computer and video games are a form of entertainment enjoyed by a diverse, worldwide consumer base that demonstrates immense energy and enthusiasm for games. With an exciting new generation of hardware, outstanding software, and unmatched creativity, technology, and content, [the] industry will continue to thrive in the years ahead” (ESA 2014). Gallagher’s prediction for the future of gaming suggests that the industry’s success rests on the intersection of a thriving community of gamers and modern gaming technology. The purpose of this research is to better understand how smaller communities within the more general gaming community are formed in the context of online gaming and the role of technological inscription in their development. To explore these issues I conducted a virtual ethnography of one of the most popular online video games: StarCraft II (SC2).

StarCraft

The StarCraft franchise (SC), released by Blizzard Entertainment, is a series of military science fiction, real-time strategy games with both single player and multiplayer modes. StarCraft (SC1) was released on March 31, 1998 for Microsoft Windows and Mac OS in 1999 to critical acclaim, and its sequel StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty was released to similar praise for both Windows and Mac OS X on July 27, 2010. By December of 2010 SC2 had already sold 4.5 million copies, with another estimated 2.3
million copies of the game being pirated (Activision 2011). Today, the multiplayer servers of SC2 are the most populated SC game space and are therefore the main field site for my research pertaining to the series.

The StarCraft series is set during the Earth’s 25th century and revolves around three species known as the Terran, Zerg, and Protoss who are fighting for control of the Koprulu Sector of the Milky Way galaxy. Each of these playable species has its own back-story and lore, which informs the distinct types of units and strategies for winning available to players. The Terran are a species of humans who were exiled from Earth, and are the focus of the SC2 base game.¹ The first expansion for SC2, known as Heart of the Swarm and released in March 2013, revolves around the Zerg species, or The Swarm. The Zerg “is a terrifying and ruthless amalgamation of biologically advanced, arthropodal aliens” (Underwood et al. 1998). Finally, a second expansion for SC2, titled Legacy of the Void is currently in beta testing as of March 31, 2015, and centers on the Protoss, which are a sapient humanoid species with advanced technology.

There are two significant features of SC2 that are relevant to my research about online gaming communities. The first is the SC2 editor used for creating custom content, with a focus on arcade maps in this research, and the second is the growth of a major eSports community of professional players of the game. Although map editors and

¹ The "base game" is the basic version of a game that is initially released, and which contains all the components of the game needed to experience and play the game fully. An "expansion" for a game refers to additional content added to the base game after it is released. Expansions can be stand alone games, but are usually not as extensive as the base game. However, the base game is often, but not always, required to play an expansion. Finally, "DLC" refers to "downloadable content," which are generally smaller additions to a game such as new outfits for a character or a small number of new quests and missions. DLC is downloaded directly through a player's computer or video game console and added into the base game (expansions can also have DLC).
professional play are not unique to SC2 they do represent two defining components of community building around the game. The former allows players to edit maps, scenarios, and campaigns and then share those creations with other players. I aim to show how this technical addition to the game by Blizzard has influenced community building by providing a collaborative space for players. In addition, competitive StarCraft has become one of the most successful eSports in the world, and multiplayer competitive play is particularly popular in South Korea. Tournaments include a ranking system, players who are sponsored by various corporations, and substantial prize pools. Competitive StarCraft play offers a unique window into the processes of globalization and transnationalism, which will be explored further through the lens of community building.

Statement of Research

The objective of this research is to examine how communities are created and mediated through video games. Michele Willson (2006) most succinctly defines community as “ways of being-together” (1). Virtual communities are then “experienced through technological mediation over the Internet” (Willson 2006:2), which is the definition of online or virtual communities that I use throughout this research. More specifically, I am interested in the ways in which communities are formed, maintained, and dissolved in relation to the online multiplayer aspect of games. Therefore, I define online gaming communities as those groups that exist in cyberspace, not necessarily

2 Howard Rheingold further popularized the concept of “virtual community”, as defined by Willson, as “a group of digitised identities that meet regularly in cyberspace” (as cited in Nayar 2004:163). For the purposes of this research, I have additionally adopted Pramod Nayar’s (2004) expansion on Rheingold’s definition, which includes interactivity, shared interests, and a lack of geographical restrictions as prerequisites for a virtual community.
exclusively (e.g., gaming conventions, LARPing and LAN parties), which are oriented around a common interest in video games, both specifically and generally. SC2 has a large single player portion, but the online multiplayer section represents a space where gaming communities can be directly observed in action.

According to Victoria Bernal (2005), “the role of the Internet in facilitating community building is often conceptualized in naive terms, for instance, through the vision of ‘the global village’ that constructs cyberspace as borderless connectivity and inclusivity” (662). Therefore, I intend to look at community building as a process of bringing individuals together, even if that process requires excluding others, and of solidifying their bonds to one another so that some actual, even if also imagined (Anderson 1983), group is formed. The process of community building is not seamless, and I explore ways in which online gaming groups navigate the bumpy path of including, excluding, building, sustaining, and dismantling. I also map, diagrammatically, where and how these communities exist in-game and, in other online spaces.

One contribution I make to current research and popular media representations of "gaming culture" in the United States is to question the public misconception of "gamers" as a discrete and easily stereotyped group of young children, socially ineptstoners, and violent misfits.³ In addition, I suggest that anthropology as a field can benefit from an increased focus on non-traditional topics and communities, and that these communities

³ See much beloved films such as The Wizard (1989), which depicts gaming audiences as primarily “young children” or Grandma’s Boy (2006), which portrays them as “socially inept stoners” (Mathias 2014); Also see Hardball’s Chris Matthews’ discussion with activist Jack Thompson about the Virginia Tech school shootings (yfsemtex 2007) and news coverage of gaming research such as Time’s article by Jeffrey Grubb (2014), which equates television violence with video game violence and ignores that the average gamer is 31 years old (Locker 2014).
must be understood within the context of the diversity that exists in modern online spaces. To achieve this, I conducted a multi-sited virtual ethnography to learn about the communities formed around SC2. Although SC2 is hugely popular within the larger gaming community it is less visible to and less accessed by the general public. Because SC2 is not considered “mainstream” or “casual,” the game and its players are often ignored in the media and academic representations of gaming culture. My goal then, is to create a more nuanced understanding of what it means to belong to a community, when the community in question exists through particular kinds of gaming technology and types of games.

**Research questions**

My research explores how video game communities are mediated through online technologies by asking the following questions:

1. Who is included or excluded in online gaming communities, and to what extent are traditional markers such as nationality involved?
2. Why do people join, stay, or leave online gaming communities?
3. How are online gaming communities formed, maintained, or dissolved?
4. What is the relationship between technology and community building?

By asking these questions I evaluate what is both unique and familiar about online gaming communities being online as compared to communities that exist entirely offline.

Although many types of traditional communities that exist in physical space have

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4 Games such as the *Halo, Call of Duty,* and *Grand Theft Auto* series are popular with the general public, but also cited as examples of violent and therefore dangerous games by news outlets and concerned parents. Other games and social virtual worlds such as *The Sims* and *Second Life* are also popular, but seen as less “hardcore,” or difficult, by many gamers.
migrated to the Internet to varying degrees, some gaming communities have specifically been constructed online in ways that would not exist otherwise (Bernal 2005). That is, the convergence of a diverse group of players from around the globe on the basis of playing online games, and through the use of specific modern technologies such as message boards and electronic voice and text chat, lends itself to the creation of community not through convenience of location, but through choice of interest. Furthermore, these communities are both liberated and constrained by the emergence of these technologies in ways that are less relevant to offline communities.

**Review of Literature**

*Virtual Ethnography: Anthropology and the Study of Online Games and Virtual Worlds*

Several anthropologists have conducted ethnographies of online games and virtual worlds such as *Second Life* (Boellstorff 2008; Malaby 2009; also see Baldwin and Achterberg 2013 and Johnson 2010 for relevant works outside of anthropology), *World of Warcraft* (Bainbridge 2010; Golub 2010; Lindtner and Dourish 2011; Nardi 2010), *EverQuest* (Castronova 2005; Taylor 2006), and *Uru* (Pearce 2011). Each of these online spaces is a 3D virtual world. *Second Life* (*SL*), in particular, was developed intentionally as a “social virtual world” whereas others, such as *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*), were developed as games that evolved into social spaces. However, massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs), such as *WoW*, differ significantly from other genres of video
games in terms of gameplay, visual appearance, audience, and other features. For example, *SC2* is created by Blizzard, the same company responsible for *WoW*, but the former uses a top-down point of view and emphasizes one-on-one competition while the latter employs first and third-person perspectives in a more collaborative environment. The differences in how the two games are played and their visual styles lead to variations in who plays these games, and therefore how communities exist around both.

**Who is Included**

*(Virtual) Community*

In anthropology, a common level of analysis is the community. Although individuals are important, “the anthropologist will tend to emphasize the study of a community’s social organization. Therefore, when he studies the individual, he will examine the role of this individual within a social framework” (Warner 1941:786; See also Hiebert 1997). My research will look at the individual as part of a community and communities as they are a part of the individual. But what is a community? An important and early definition of the term was first used in 1426 to describe a "commonwealth, nation or state" (Oxford English Dictionary). Despite the recent obscurity of this particular definition, community, and the culture found there, continues to be associated with physical geography and where people live (Gupta and Ferguson 1992). Such a corporeally bounded understanding of community raises questions for digital ethnographers, because "in cyberspace a person's identity is defined by words and actions

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5 The Entertainment Software Association reported in 2014 that 24% of games played online in 2013 belonged to the action, sports, strategy, and role-playing genres. However, most video games that have been researched through participant observation, such as *WoW* and *SL*, are persistent multiplayer universes (referred to most commonly as virtual worlds by those who have studied them), which make up only 11% of the same market.
not body and place" (Dodge and Kitchin 2001:154). For instance, how can a researcher know where a player physically resides and how relevant is that knowledge for understanding the inner workings of an online community? I found that this information was important for understanding how community is formed in relation to technological barriers such as server restrictions and time zone differences. However, it was less useful for explaining cultural and social influences on community building, which is in contrast to the work of other researchers studying, for example, multiculturalism online (Jacobs 2008).

Scholars of nationalism and transnationalism have already shown face-to-face interaction is not required to create community. For example, Bernal (2005) conducted a virtual ethnography to understand the use of online communication by an Eritrean diaspora between 1992 and 2000. Ultimately, Bernal argues that online communities can serve “as a form of community in [their] own right,” and that cyberspace is actually a space that constructs identity (2005:668). Cyberspace does not physically exist in the most narrow and traditional sense, just as a diaspora is not physically in its homeland. Both are displaced and require the social construction of space (Bernal 2005:662). The creation of space by online diasporas exemplifies Benedict Anderson’s (1983) concept of imagined communities. For Anderson, the nation “is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (1983:6). Gamers online may never physically meet or even be aware of one another on an individual level, but each is generally aware that there are other gamers who share
their interest in SC2, for example. Arjun Appadurai further brings the imagined community to video games by showing how mass media makes possible a “‘community of sentiment’, a group that begins to imagine and feel things together” (1996:8). My research explores how online gaming communities are imagined, and whether or not SC2 players come to feel and think of themselves as such.

In addition to the difficulty of determining where it exists, “community” is problematic for anthropologists because the term suggests that people belong to discrete groups (See Abu-Lughod 1991:469). However, we are actually “simultaneously part of other interacting communities, societies, or cultures” (Wilson and Peterson 2002:455). Interacting communities are especially complicated by the emergence of online communities. A useful way to view online communities is through the lens of the network state and small-world network as it is known in mathematics (Nayar 2004; Shirky 2008). In the network state, “various nodes of the network are interdependent, so that no node can ignore others in the decision-making process” (Nayar 2004:197). The small-world network refers to a type of network in which small, densely connected groups are more loosely connected to other small, densely connected groups (Shirky 2008:215). According to Clay Shirky, “In Small World networks bonding tends to happen within the clusters, while bridging happens between clusters” (2008:224). This research will attempt to map these networks, diagrammatically, to better show the vast interconnections that exist within the larger gaming community, which will allow for exploring the meaning of these communities and how they come together or disband.

*Play, Virtual worlds, and Games*
Having established that online communities do in fact exist, it is relevant to describe what constitutes an online game. One limitation of existing research is the focus on “virtual worlds” broadly, and not on “games” specifically (Boellstorff 2008; Malaby 2009). Anthropology can benefit from researching the latter, because video games represent an emerging technological medium in which many of the traditional topics of interest in anthropology such as gender, race, and nationalism are now being played out. Furthermore, anthropological game studies have practical applications to game development and publishing by making these games more culturally sensitive and relevant to players.

To begin, we must understand what it means to play, or to game. The French sociologist Roger Caillois (1961) provides the most pertinent definition of play. He suggests that play is free, not obligatory. Furthermore, play is said to occur in its own space and time, known as the “magic circle” (i.e., work and play are separate). Caillois also argues that play is uncertain, or unfixed in terms of its outcome, and it is also unproductive, creating nothing new (1961:9–10). Caillois further classifies games into what he considers four fundamental categories: competition (agon), chance (alea), simulation (mimicry) and vertigo (ilinx). Games are then differentiated based on where they lay on a continuum from uncontrolled fantasy (paidia) to purposely-tedious conventions (ludus) (Caillois 1961:12–13). Caillois’ description of play is useful in game studies, but it was impossible for Caillois, writing in the 1960s, to have predicted the emergence of modern online gaming. As I will illustrate, the concept of “the magic circle” and games as “unproductive” do not apply to many video games, including SC2.
Rather, we see that the boundaries around game spaces are blurry and permeable. Furthermore, productive play is now understood as more than merely material production. It also includes the production of cultural capital such as “aspiration, selfhood, and nationhood” (Lindtner and Dourish 2011:455), and as I will show, community.

As noted, several scholars studying online communities have specifically looked at virtual worlds (Boellstorff 2008; Malaby 2009; Baldwin and Achterberg 2013; Johnson 2010). To synthesize a myriad of definitions, virtual worlds can be understood as computer-generated, three-dimensional spaces and places that are inhabited and shared by actual persons who are represented by an animated character (Bainbridge 2007; Boellstorff 2008; Castronova 2005; Malaby 2009; Nardi 2010; Pearce 2011). Celia Pearce (2011) additionally argues that “a virtual world is by definition a social world. This is what distinguishes it from single-player worlds” (19).

However, SC2 is not merely a virtual world. It has structured rules, objectives, and clear criteria for winning and losing, and is therefore also a game. Yet, fewer scholars who have written about virtual worlds have specifically defined what is considered a game. For Thomas Malaby (2009), a game is “a semi-bounded and socially legitimate domain of contrived contingency that generates interpretable outcomes” (84). Both Pearce (2011) and Jane McGonigal (2011) further suggest that games have goals, structure or a feedback system, and voluntary participation. Less important to the definition of games is “interactivity, graphics, narrative, rewards, competition, virtual environments, or the idea of ‘winning’” (McGonigal 2011:21). Overall, it appears that the
main distinction between a game and a virtual world is that a game has an added layer of structure or rules. In this sense, it is useful to think of virtual worlds as existing on a continuum from purely virtual worlds with little to no rules to clearly defined games with increasing layers of rules and structure. It is worth keeping in mind that a virtual world such as SL may technically have rules of conduct, which structure how the virtual world is experienced, but this differs from rules that make a virtual world into an actual game space. For example, the rules of conduct in a virtual world may stipulate that players are not allowed to harass one another or use racially offensive language, or else they will be banned from the virtual space. In contrast, the rules of a game would stipulate that players need to collect a certain number of objects or kill their virtual opponents in order to increase their skill level or win. It should also be noted that players might colloquially refer to something as a game even though they can make the distinction that it is not. For instance, individuals may say that they "play the game Second Life" although they do not view it as a game in the same sense as SC2—a strictly defined game in every sense of the word.

The distinction between a virtual world and a game is an important one for understanding online communities, or communities of play, because it informs the differences between the types of communities found in both. As discussed, scholars have largely focused on online communities that take place in virtual worlds that are considered persistent and embodied. However, according to William Bainbridge (2010), “Strategy games differ from MMORPGs chiefly in limiting the number of players interacting with each other, currently from two to sixteen, depending on the game, and by
representing the user by something like an army or an economic system, rather than by a single avatar” (1). Avatars are important, according to Charles Ess and May Thorseth (2011), because they are the most visible form of “embodied co-presence with one another” (XI) available in game spaces, which Ess and Thorseth argue is necessary for building trust, and therefore, community (See also Ventrella 2011:25). So what does this mean for games such as SC2 where the game world does not always persist when a player leaves, and where avatars are not fully developed to the same extent or deployed in the same manner as those in other virtual worlds such as WoW?

I argue that all games are virtual worlds, although not all virtual worlds are games. This means that if all virtual worlds are “social” then so are all games—including, in contrast to Pearce’s (2011) assertion, single player games. Even single player games are social on a fundamental level due to the imagined community formed around gaming in general—even if play itself is not social. That is, players are aware of other players and they are also increasingly found congregating in non-game spaces such as online forums, wikis, streaming services, and so on. Also, I assert that realistic graphics, online persistence and traditional avatars are not necessary components of a virtual world, nor do they determine whether or not an online space, or more specifically, a game, is “social.” Instead, these features may serve to explain, in part, how certain gaming spaces are social (Taylor 2006). In other words, games like SC2, which do not have online persistence or rely on visual cues such as body language from avatars, differ from games such as WoW, which do, in the way members communicate, and therefore how participants create their social world in, and around, the respective games.
Online Games

Boellstorff et al. (2012) do not “consider online communities sustained via chat forums or other media [to be] virtual worlds” (8). First-person shooters and single-player non-persistent worlds also fail their test for virtuality. With these strict criteria most video games would not be considered virtual worlds, despite being part of a larger network of spaces distinguished by their virtuality. In order to avoid confusion with the existing body of research on virtual worlds I will use the term “online games” instead of “virtual worlds” to specifically describe video games that have some component of gameplay that utilizes (whether optional or otherwise) online interconnectivity.6

Why and How Online Gaming Communities Exist

For Caillois, the allure of gaming is, in part, related to escape. That is, games of competition and chance create the “condition of pure equality denied [people] in real life,” while mimicry allows one to “escape himself and become another” (Caillois 1961:19). Tom Boellstorff (2008) disagrees. He and Alex Golub (2010) argue that people play games for the relationships that are formed. T.L. Taylor (2006) and Bonnie Nardi (2010) additionally suggest that the development of “skilled performance” is one important aspect of why people choose to play games. That is, players increasingly enjoy a game the better they become at it, and as their ability to show off their skills to other players improves. However, McGonigal (2011) provides the most well-rounded reasoning for why people game by showing how “computer and video games are

6 By my definition, all video games are virtual worlds—but only some virtual worlds are games. For example, Second Life is a social virtual world, but not a game. In contrast, StarCraft is a gaming virtual world.
fulfilling *genuine human needs* that the real world is currently unable to satisfy” (emphasis in original). These needs include, “more satisfying work, better hope of success, stronger social connectivity, and the chance to be a part of something bigger than ourselves” (McGonigal 2011:114; see also Castronova 2005). While I do not show that “sociality” is the main or only reason people play games I do consider it an important factor. In other words, I argue that RTS games in particular are less likely to draw in participants with the explicit goal of “building community”—mainly due to the difficulty of such games and the more direct focus on the game itself—compared to inherently more socially driven games. Nonetheless, the importance of social connections remains entrenched in the social conscious of RTS gamers.

Many scholars write that all games are fundamentally social (Bainbridge 2007; Caillios 1961; McGonigal 2011; See also Boellstorff 2008). Games are social, even if someone is playing alone, because there is a competitive nature for “your personal best” to be better than someone else’s personal best (Caillios 1961:37; McGonigal 2011:269). Additionally, “every multiplayer game begins with a cooperative agreement” (McGonigal 2011:268) between players. Other scholars have suggested that online games are social, but negatively so, due to the time they take away from “offline friendship” (Castronova 2005:100). McGonigal in particular provides a useful understanding of sociality in many modern online games when she describes “ambient sociability” or the concept of “playing alone together” (2011:89). That is, many players in both social virtual worlds and online multiplayer games will rarely, if ever, actually interact directly with one
another, but instead feel a sense of sociality merely by sharing the virtual environment and shared experience.

For some scholars, such as Shirky (2008), communities are a given, because “human beings are social creatures” (14). However, “new technology enables new kinds of group-forming,” (Shirky 2008:17) because the new technology is “flexible enough to match our social capabilities” (Shirky 2008:20). Although scholars generally agree that games are social, it is not enough to merely define a game as social or not social. Taylor (2006) in particular unpacks the black box known as “the social” and explains how there are different modes of socialization. My research shows this to be the case for SC2 where one can play alone, with one other person, with 13 other people, versus computers, with a certain group of people, or with complete strangers. Sometimes, these choices are determined by how much a player wants to be social, and sometimes by how the game is structured by its designers.

**Technology and Community Building**

Video game communities do not exist simply because video games exist. Like offline communities traditionally studied by anthropologists, online gaming communities are socially created, but they are also technologically constructed. Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar's (1979) concept of inscription is useful to this discussion for understanding how communities of play are social. Latour refers to inscription devices in scientific laboratories that "transform a material substance into a figure or diagram" (1979:51), thus altering the way observers view, therefore interpret, information. “Inscription,” as applied to gambling machines in Las Vegas by Natasha Schüll (2013)
and as I apply it now to video games, refers to the ways in which developers code their software and create gaming environments to more-or-less restrict or influence how their consumers use and experience their creations. Several scholars looking at games have noted this phenomenon, such as Jane McGonigal (2011) and Nicholas Carr (2011) who have argued that producers and consumers usually “don’t see the broader implications of their work” (Carr 2011:450). In contrast, others (Malaby 2009; Nardi 2010; Pearce 2011; Taylor 2006) have shown that creators consciously influence the socialization process in-game and are at least aware of their total lack of control. That is, some virtual worlds, such as SL, are intentionally designed to allow participants to produce their own creations and experiences—beyond the original developers’ imaginations and intentions. As a synthesis of these views, Tarleton Gillespie (2007) argues, "technology is constructed so as to be consequential," (15) and Natasha Schüll (2013) shows that technology is neither determining (i.e. pure materialism) nor is it passive or neutral to human control. Instead, Schüll outlines an unequal “collusion” between consumers and the technology they consume. That is, technology and human control interact unevenly (Schüll 2013:19). Regardless of intention or awareness on the part of developers, it does appear that “the surrender is always partial. You get control and are controlled” (Bissell 2010:39). It is from this assumption that I explore how participants in online gaming communities are guided or controlled in their process of building community and vice versa. My ultimate goal then, is to outline how gamers are, and have always been, necessarily a fragmented community due to technological barriers. In other words, "we always only have access to making partial connections," (Klumme 2008) which means that my participants represent
only a partial representation of "gaming culture," and that this research is itself necessarily incomplete.

Finally, it is worth looking at the technology behind video games, because Gabriella Coleman (2011) has shown that people experience digital media differently—that some people are more saturated than others. On the other hand, Kiri Miller (2012) has suggested that social media platforms, such as YouTube and message boards, can create a stronger connection between participants than games themselves, because unlike most multiplayer games, which require players to participate at the same time, non-game spaces “accommodate time-delayed interaction” (223). That is, they create fewer barriers for people trying to connect across time zones, with “limited Internet access or slow connections . . . [or] those who require extra time to understand or communicate in the language being used” (Miller 2012:223). Therefore, my exploration of online spaces external to SC2 is relevant for understanding how varying technological blueprints result in different degrees of access, and by extension, different opportunities and methods for creating community.

Transnationalism

Producers of online gaming content are involved not only in the process of technological inscription, but also broader trends of globalization and transnationalism. Differences in the production of, access to, and saturation of online games varies across borders. For instance, Peichi Chung (2009) has shown that South Korea has a strong local gaming market, allows foreign investment, and online gaming is culturally supported by the government. In contrast, Singapore relies heavily on transnational companies, and its
government more directly influences relationships between local firms and transnational corporations (67). Additionally, South Korean games have historically fared poorly in The United States (Chung 2009:71), whereas Japanese games such as Japanese role-playing games (JRPGs) and games released by Nintendo are quite popular. Therefore, whether or not online gaming communities are becoming more transnational is dependent on the context of individual players and the arbitrary criteria used to define a group as transnational. The purpose of this brief discussion is to highlight that gaming, more broadly, has, is and will become more or less transnational for some nation states in some contexts, with gaming companies and governments playing an important role in global development. For now, geographical borders and national cultures continue to play at least a partial role in defining online gaming communities, as I will show through the lens of global competitions and the experiences of gamers.

**Methods**

*Multi-Sited Virtual Ethnography*

Johannes Fabian and Vincent de Rooij (2008) argue that anthropologists do not have to travel to foreign places or cover a particular territory (520), and Taylor argues that “a field site may be understood as an assemblage of actors, places, practices, and artifacts that can be physical, virtual, or a combination of both” (Boellstorff et al. 2012:60). This approach acknowledges that “most persons who participate in games and other interactive media like metaverses play more than one game or metaverse” (Boellstorff 2006:33). Although I am using a specific game, SC2, as a case study, it was most fruitful to follow players as they traversed various game and online spaces.
Therefore, my research is designed as a multi-sited virtual ethnography, which allowed me to stay with participants as they played other games such as WC3 or LoL, and as they socialized through non-game spaces such as the XY website (See: Hine 2000:64; Marcus 1995:105; Pearce 2011:55).

Nardi (2010) suggests that it may be more difficult to conduct research in games, as opposed to non-game virtual worlds, because much of the time is spent playing. However, “the term *participant observation* is intentionally oxymoronic; you cannot fully participate and fully observe at the same time, but it is in this paradox that anthropologists conduct their best work” (Boellstorff 2006:32). Additionally, I found that fewer ethnographically relevant interactions pertaining to my research questions occurred during gameplay than before and after. Therefore, I had no issue with conducting participant observation in a RTS game space such as SC2.

**Participant Observation**

I engaged in a form of virtual participant observation with a shifting, but semi-permanent, group of 12–20 individuals who play SC2 together on a weekly basis. Demographically, the group is varied regarding age, race and ethnicity, national origin, sex and gender, geographical location and socioeconomic background—although most members are White males who reside in North America. This group formed outside of SC2 around 2000 through forums on a website originally called XY.com, now XY.org, and collectively referred to simply as XY, which is dedicated to creating customized campaigns for Blizzard’s first StarCraft game (see above description of SC1). The group has since been both maintained and dissolved in various ways through the use of the XY
website, actual game play in both SC2 and other computer games, and other online communication technologies. The estimated amount of in-game time, including both solo play and group observations, for this stage of research was roughly 140 hours, spread out over seven months from November, 2014 to May, 2015.  

Textual Analysis

To supplement my participant observation, and in order to address the large amount of written content passed between my participants, I conducted a textual analysis. According to Alan McKee (2003), “texts are the material traces that are left of the practice of sensemaking—the only empirical evidence we have of how other people make sense of the world” (15). Miller (2012), who has also written about digital media and participatory culture, has shown that message boards, YouTube videos, and blogs have a collaborative nature that “build on (and build up) relationships . . . [and] generate ‘sensational knowledge’ that connects dispersed participants” (5; also see McGonigal’s 2011 work on projects). For SC2 a textual analysis was conducted on archived message board posts on the forums where the participating group first formed. This analysis was useful for comparing how participants described their own experiences of joining the group during interviews to records of actual interactions that occurred through the forums at the time of the group’s formation. The real names and locations of these out-of-game spaces, and their contributors, have been kept confidential by paraphrasing direct quotes.  

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7 www.howlongtobeat.com estimates the following length of times to beat both the main and “extra” story lines in each game: 20.5 hours for StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty (single player only); and 12 hours for StarCraft II: Heart of the Swarm (single player only). Playing through the solo campaigns of SC2 served as an introduction to the game's mechanics and story, and the bulk of my research was conducted during multiplayer sessions.
and content in order to protect the identities of participants who were not able to directly consent to this research.

Interviews

I conducted six individual semi-structured interviews and one group interview that lasted between 30 minutes and three hours. All interviews were conducted entirely online. The most common method for conducting interviews was text only chat, held through instant messaging systems such as AIM and Google Hangouts. However, I also conducted individual and group interviews using Ventrilo, a voice chat software. My interview questions helped me with preliminary information about how to access the community and who else to interview, and allowed me to further probe issues that arose during my participant observation. Furthermore, the data collected through interviews proved to be particularly fruitful for gauging whether or not participants in online gaming communities were consciously aware of technological guidance and limitations to how they experience community, which was not always apparent during participant observation.

Ethics

Foucault, Barthes, and “several other post-structuralist theorists question the notion of the author” (Nayar 2004:100), and it can be particularly difficult to determine the author of online information. Regardless, as long as I was able to determine even perceived ownership on the part of content contributors, I made every effort to gain consent for use of all visual and textual material. However, I requested to waive all signed consent due to the electronic nature of this research. Instead, all consent was
recorded through online “text” communication, and this was approved by the George Mason IRB. Furthermore, although researchers have noted the permeability of the public and private spaces online (Berend 2010; see also Bainbridge 2007:475), and the spaces I will be studying are logistically and legally public, I chose to follow in the footsteps of Pearce (2011) who “adopted the standard ethical practice of maintaining study subjects’ and informants’ anonymity through the use of pseudonyms for individuals, groups, and locations” (70). One participant expressed to me that although he made the replays public by posting them on YouTube he did so with the assumption that “few would find them in the first place . . . and didn’t expect it might [be used] for . . . research down the road.” Taking his lead, I chose to change the name of the group, the weekly Event, members, and so on. Although it is probable that those within the group who read this thesis would easily be able to determine the true identities of each participant it is my hope that outsiders would not be so inclined—and if so, would find it difficult.

The “Real World”

Boellstorff et al. (2012) describe a field site as “an assemblage of actors, places, practices, and artifacts that can be physical, virtual, or a combination of both” (60). As such, I was aware that my participants had lives outside of SC2, both online and in the physical world. However, Boellstorff (2008) completed his “fieldwork entirely inside Second Life,” (4) because he felt that the distinction between offline and online interactions was increasingly inconsequential as only a very small percentage of online gamers will ever interact offline. Therefore, I did not intend to ask my participants about offline identifying information. Yet, certain distinguishing characteristics did present
themselves naturally through the research process. These facts, when brought to light, often surprised the participants themselves—for example, after one member revealed that he was much younger than everyone else had assumed. Those who spoke with me privately also showed interest in their fellow group members, although they were respectful of privacy concerns. Several joked that our interviews and informal chat sessions were longer and more in-depth than those they have had with actual members of the group when it came to non-game related topics. Indeed, I noticed during my observations that sharing personal information, while not entirely taboo, was clearly not a focus of The Event. Generally, when people did share personal information it related to the game. For example, a player may express that they live with their parents or outside of the United States to explain why their Internet is so slow. Or they may reveal information about their occupation in reference to why they have been gone from The Event for several weeks. Other mundane topics, such as the weather (as most of my research took place during the winter months in the Northern Hemisphere), were not uncommon. However, players opted not to delve into their personal life in any real depth—at least not in public chat (it is possible that players talked to others privately, which I cannot entirely account for).

Nor was much discussion directed at “real world” controversial topics such as political issues. At the most extreme, any type of debate or argument was contained to video game (or other media) related topics such as reviews of new maps or other games. Overall, it became quite apparent that the desire for group cohesion and a certain lack of “drama” were important for most players involved in the group. By focusing on the game
itself this group has largely eliminated at least one reason for players leaving. According to Boellstorff et al. (2012), “virtual world ethnographers have long noted that we must be diligent about how the people we study define the distinction between private and public with reference to particular communities and activities” (135). Therefore, taking a cue from the players themselves, I chose not to delve into the personal, offline lives of participants, only soaking up what little they freely offered unprompted. Although I argue that gaming spaces are permeable it simply was not conducive to completing this research to probe participants for this sort of information.

**Data Analysis**

Virtual ethnographies present unique obstacles and opportunities for data collection and analysis. My participant observation in SC2 was conducted entirely on a PC. Data was collected through traditional field notes recorded via computer, image and video captures of game play, digital recording of voice chat, and direct "copying" of text communication. Interview transcriptions and field notes were then coded in Microsoft Word using thematic keywords and color-coding. Finally, as part of my research I utilized a program, specially programmed in Python by my key informant for the purposes of this research, that read SC2 replays and extracted useful information such as how many players attended each Event, how long each Event lasted, and so on. This information is presented in graphical form later in this thesis and provides a snapshot of how my research group is structured.
CHAPTER TWO: HISTORY OF XY.COM AND THE EVENT

According to Boellstorff et al. (2012), “Culture always has a history. Even virtual worlds, which can seem unprecedented, have histories that should be a priority for data collection. Archival work is, in our view, essential to any ethnographic project” (120). “The group” as defined in this research consists of players who come together one night a week to play StarCraft II (SC2). This event is colloquially referred to simply as “The Event” throughout this research. The Event was created with connection to a website called XY, which is dedicated to building custom content for games such as StarCraft (SC1), Warcraft III (WC3), and SC2. The Event began after the release of SC, which came out in 1998, and continued through the releases of WC3 in 2002 and SC2 in 2010. The host of The Event is a player named John who has been with the group since its beginning. He is responsible for choosing which maps to play and inviting players into games. When players join The Event, in-game via Battle.net, they are able to access an array of information such as news, events, and information related to the group. Information available to members of the XY game (as opposed to XY website) group includes details on the origin, time, host, and locations for viewing of The Event. Players can also learn what to expect from participating, and the technical requirements for

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8 According to Wikimedia Foundation Inc., “Battle.net is an internet-based online gaming, digital distribution, and digital rights management platform developed by Blizzard Entertainment. Battle.net was launched on November 30, 1996, with the release of Blizzard's action-role-playing video game Diablo.”
communicating with other players. The XY game group includes roughly 100 members, one banned player who no longer has access to The Event, and five “officers” who have special privileges such as being able to edit the group’s information page. All of this material is publicly available to anyone with access to the game, and is representative of how technology can limit or grow group membership. While the developers of SC2 have implemented the ability to create groups and post this information, they have also left it up to players themselves about how much or how little material they make available. In the case of The Event, players have made it relatively easy for others who are not members of the XY website forums to find and participate in The Event; thus, ensuring “drop-ins” and potentially new, more permanent members.

Bainbridge (2010) has suggested that one way to regulate players is “to build into the game a system for managing groups of players, like the guild in World of Warcraft” (36). Those who administer guilds are afforded important powers such as inviting, removing, and promoting other members. Within the larger XY game group (and more broadly within StarCraft) are clans. Clans represent another form of group boundaries that are programmed into the game. For example, many, although certainly not all, participants in The Event are members of a clan called ArcadeExplorers. This clan has roughly 25 members, and although it is the most represented within The Event, many participants joined The Event having already belonged to other clans. The software in SC1 did not formally support clans. Instead, players manually included the name of their clan in brackets before their username when creating a new account; for example, “[ArcadeExplorers] Account Name.” During the heyday of SC1 in the late 1990s and
early 2000s players would hold their own tournaments using these self-identified clan tags. Clan tags allow players to showcase their group membership to both other members and non-members when meeting in matches. The release of SC2 brought with it the formal integration of clans and official clan rankings. One of my participants, James, is the creator of ArcadeExplorers in SC2, which allows him to invite people to join the clan, increase their rankings so that they too can invite others, and remove members from the clan. Although asked by The Event’s host, John, to hand over the clan leadership, James refused. However, James pointed out that John runs the XY chat channel, which is used during games by more people than those in the clan. According to James, there is no status associated with “owning” the clan or chat channels. Yet, he conceded that there is a certain sense of pride among some members who can point to their participation in the group since its inception—even if such status does not result in significant power or recognition by other players.

The History of XY

A long time Event attendee named William suggested that because the group “originated out of a forum (XY), and from a company (Blizzard), rather than a specific franchise (StarCraft) [the group] has been intrinsically more fluid while still retaining older connections.” In other words, gaming groups tend to disband with the waning popularity of the game they are oriented around, but this group has other points of reference beyond SC1. I turn next to one of those points: the XY website. XY is a site dedicated to creating campaigns, maps, mods, and total conversions for SC1, WC3, and SC2. According to William, XY was originally structured around SC1 as a single player
game, but today is “basically a fanfiction site (fan modding + narrative).” Although my research group overlaps with members of the XY website, not all XY members attend John’s weekly Event. However, during the group’s formation, “XY was THE beacon of SC1 campaigns . . . and pretty much all the regulars came from XY,” according to John. Therefore, it is relevant to discuss my research questions in the context of XY’s history.

The XY website is significant, because it represents a gaming space that clearly lies outside of the “magic circle” (Caillois 1961). That is, XY, and other websites like it, represent an extension of the games its members play and create content for. XY is also important, because it is a project. McGonigal (2011) describes wikis, or online collaborative encyclopedias, as “epic projects” (108). According to McGonigal, “Adding a bit of knowledge to the wiki validates that you know at least one thing that matters to millions of other people” (2011:110). In this sense, I present the XY website as an epic project that hosts other projects, because contributors create and collaborate on custom content, which is then discussed and posted on the website. However, this content is not reached by the "millions of other people" that McGonigal refers to, because the traffic on the XY website, and the number of people who play arcade maps in SC2, is much less than those who play WoW or who have contributed to its massive wiki, as referred to by McGonigal.

One of the benefits of conducting a textual analysis of websites and online forums is the degree of archiving that occurs both by default (from lack of effort to remove information) and as a conscious effort by community members. Working on projects, such as wikis, or online encyclopedias, and modding, which is the creation of custom
content for games by players, is one way that online gaming communities tend to grow and solidify as groups (Golub 2010; Pearce 2011; Shirky 2008). Such was the case for my participants on XY who actively worked to create an archive of the website’s historical transformation on their own as well as participated in a group interview to directly discuss this subject—making my own research into the topic rather straightforward.

Kevin was the first administrator of XY, and started the website in 1999 by uploading one of his own creations. The XY administrator is essentially responsible for maintaining the website, enacting updates, controlling who is and is not allowed to use the website, and so on. After launching the website Kevin increased interest by having various SC1 related news sites advertise his work. Next, he contacted modders from other forums, such as the official Battle.net forum, who he felt would benefit from the XY website. At first, modders communicated via email, but eventually forums were implemented on XY—increasing both the speed and publicness of communication. As Shirky (2008) would suggest, this fundamentally changed the type of group that existed as more people were able to engage one another and give feedback on various projects in progress. Work therefore became more collaborative, but also more open to critique (Griffith 2011). After Kevin took a break from XY, and under new leadership, the website began to expand in numbers and branch out into different games and spin-off sites. Matthew, a seasoned modder and long time contributor to XY, suggested that XY was “anti-newbie at the beginning,” explaining that when he first visited the site with an
interest in creating total conversions he was told to go to another site called Galaxy Bros.\footnote{Total conversions are the most extreme version of modifying a game, “in which the StarCraft engine (the code underneath surface-level graphics) would be put to entirely different purposes” (Johnson 2009). Attempts at total conversions were more ambitious during the SC1 era, but most of these projects failed.}

Eventually, Kevin returned to XY, and a new period began for the website, as it was moved from one server to the next due to the cost of hosting. Keeping a website afloat represents the intersection of the limitations of technology, commerce, and leadership. New website owners must balance the technical creation of the website, finding financing to sustain the website, and keeping members informed of and interested in the website’s existence and content. Failing to do so risks destroying any hope of creating and sustaining an online community.

After the release of SC1 and three or so years into its existence, the forum reached its peak with members engaging in many projects and non-gaming related activities. Over time, the population of the forum shifted as veteran contributors began to leave for other forums, websites, and offline obligations and new contributors joined. It was also during this time that a major incident nearly collapsed the community entirely: Kevin’s closing of XY.com (for which I found several different explanations involving various degrees of conflict between participants), which resulted in the website being recreated as XY.org. On the surface, the conversion was a simple domain name change, but, in effect, it created a major barrier to anyone interested in accessing the community. That is, when the .com website vanished only those who were active on XY, which at the time was merely a handful of people, were aware of the change. Additionally, changing from .com to .org meant that all links to the website were made inactive or removed, search engines
no longer directed to the correct site, and so on. Since this development, at least five more members have administered the website with even more acting as moderators.

In its earlier years, XY shared the custom content market with several other smaller sites. Administrators of these sites often discussed merging, but no one was willing to abandon control over their own site. However, Christopher, the current administrator of XY since 2006, eventually began “eating up all the websites: BBQ, HardWater, etc...” according to Matthew. Christopher suggested that XY’s evolution was successful because instead of trying to directly merge multiple websites, which other administrators were resistant to do, he simply asked the authors of custom content to post directly to XY—therefore making other sites irrelevant.

When WC3 was released in 2003, campaign making and modding decreased significantly compared to the SC1 era in general, which directly affected the relevancy of the XY website. Ultimately, XY was not the most popular website for content creation during the heyday of WC3. Furthermore, other sites were as relevant as XY in the SC2 modding community when the latest game in the series was released in 2010. For example, WarMods.net (WMN) came to the scene later than XY, but was primarily oriented around mapping instead of mods and large projects. A second site called Maptopia spawned from WMN to focus on mods. Meanwhile, the small projects that XY members were making were specifically for gaming nights (i.e., The Event).

When WC3 was released, content creators were excited for the new engine the game brought with it, and the community looked forward to new content that would be analogous to other work such as the Antioch Chronicles campaign created in SC1, which
served to inspire countless modders to create new projects. However, several factors combined failed to make that dream come true: a new editor that players found difficult to work with, a lack of support from Blizzard, and a general apathy by modders for creating new content. Next, I outline several examples of each condition to show how they worked together to significantly change the SC1, WC3 and SC2 communities.

New Frontiers: (Re)Learning how to Edit

The first barrier to community building around custom content was the result of implementing new editors in both WC3 and SC2. The editors are a component of each game that allow players to create custom content such as new maps for play. However, people often simply find it difficult to work with new tools and, at the very least, require time to adjust. WC3’s editor had a more demanding learning curve, too, which only increased for SC2’s editor. Christopher, the current administrator of XY, recalled that he and others attempted a WC3 project, but that it was “above their heads compared to SC1.” Furthermore, according to Matthew, a XY contributor who is particularly familiar with each game’s editor, SC2’s editor is so slow and tedious that a task that takes a day in SC1’s editor takes weeks in SC2’s. The difficulty of working with the WC3 editor in particular meant that players accustomed to making large projects for SC1 no longer had the stamina for such a large workload and time commitment. Additionally, many players simply found it unappealing to work artistically with WC3’s fantasy setting (as opposed to SC’s science fiction setting). Therefore, people on XY focused more on “pet projects for gaming nights” such as The Event. This overall decrease in construction led to fewer players, as map rotation became stagnant.
Christopher recounted how one XY member named Gary had paid voice actors, amongst other professional and semi-professional contributors, to work on one of his projects—only for Blizzard to appropriate one of his ideas into SC2. Although Gary pressed on with his project, planning much of it before the release of SC2, he was ultimately deterred by the failures of the SC2 editor during the game’s beta phase. Timothy suggested that the attempt to emulate SC1 was a common theme in the SC2 game, as well as by its content creators, and was conclusively a failure due to technological limitations. On the surface SC2 is similar to SC1, but the two games are quite different in how they play. Christopher told me that this was the main problem for Gary, because the result of his work was more “primitive” than people expected. The group agreed that today the tools Gary needs to make his project a reality are available, at least more so than in the past, but Timothy reiterated Matthew’s sentiment that it is difficult to “go back” to a project once you have been away from it for a period of time. In other words, Blizzard’s improvements came too little, too late.

The WC3 editor led to a huge decrease in content creation, which led to many players leaving WC3 for other games. Blizzard never quite recovered from this mass exodus as it failed to improve the editor significantly for SC2. When the beta for SC2 was released it quickly became apparent that the editor was not going to live up to players’ hopes for a more creator friendly platform. Matthew went so far as to say, “Blizzard doesn’t take any custom content seriously.” For example, Blizzard did not release the ability to put 3D models into SC2 for four years after the game was released. Additionally, SC2’s internal data is messy and confusing to read, which makes it difficult
for content creators to reverse engineer code from the game. Ultimately, even fewer players were able to create content for SC2 than WC3, which did nothing to bolster the number of members at websites dedicated to content creation, such as XY.

The Cold Heart of Blizzard: The Role of Producers

A second barrier to community building through XY was also the result of Blizzard’s actions, or inactions. SC1 was hugely popular as an eSport, or professionally played video game, but WC3 did not come close to seeing the same degree of success in this arena. In competitive SC, gameplay is focused on melee, which is the default gameplay style in the game. However, melee gameplay “was pretty much a complete failure” in WC3, according to Matthew, because tournaments often devolved into a single viable or dominant strategy and predictable matchups such as night elves versus night elves. Blizzard attempted to increase the popularity of WC3 as a competitive space by spending money on tournaments, but players resisted the change from SC1 to WC3 competitively. At the same time, a small map in WC3 named Defense of the Ancients (DotA) became more popular than WC3 overall, spawning an entirely new genre called multiplayer online battle arenas (MOBAs), and acquiring the lion’s share of competitive WC3 players. According to Matthew, DotA also fundamentally changed content creation in WC3 and beyond, because the map was looked to as a large project. As a result, “many people in WC3 did not know what total conversions or mods were, and the community that grew up with WC3 became resistant to them.” In other words, Blizzard’s failure to

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10 eSports, and specifically professionally played StarCraft, include tournaments with monetary prizes and very often sponsors for individual players and teams. In contrast, non-professional players who compete against one another may play for smaller prize pools, but playing StarCraft is not their profession or primary source of income.
successfully promote *WC3* (beyond *DotA*) and *SC2* as viable competitive spaces altered the population of *XY* contributors as well as those who would remain with the group for The Event.

*Who Cares? Apathy as a Barrier*

Finally, Matthew suggested that a major culprit in the downfall of *XY* involved the changing metrics of members. Specifically, he felt that players were becoming more reflective of an “instant gratification” generation of gamers as a result of casual gaming. In other words, players wanted *other players* to create content for them, and this was reflected in the *XY* forums: new members entered with an idea, asked existing contributors to create new content, and eventually left when their visions were unfulfilled. Therefore, apathy negatively affected community building. The lack of inspiration and work ethic, in addition to genuine offline obstacles to online participation combined to change the type and number of players who frequented *XY*, and who would continue to play *SC2* on a weekly basis. As will be explored later, players who *did* decide to invest time and energy into creating custom content largely left for other content creation platforms, such as *Unity*,\(^{11}\) that are perceived as more developer friendly.

*XY’s Effect on The Event*

A precursor to The Event, and created as a result of players working around limitations set by Blizzard, was ABCnet. Christopher described “ABCnet” (circa 2001) as a private server that emulated the official Battle.net servers. Originally, a player named

\(^{11}\) According to the developer’s website, ”Unity is a flexible and powerful development platform for creating multiplatform 3D and 2D games and interactive experiences. It’s a complete ecosystem for anyone who aims to build a business on creating high-end content and connecting to their most loyal and enthusiastic players and customers” (Unity Technologies 2015).
Larry hosted the server, which required leaving the host’s computer on for the duration of play. However, Larry often turned his computer off overnight, which meant that players had a limited connection to ABCnet. Eventually, Christopher stepped in to host the server, because he was able to leave his landline connection on full-time. Ultimately, players on ABCnet stopped using the real Battle.net all together, and a smaller more active community formed around the ABCnet server. The benefit of this more intimate and unofficial community was the ability to create new types of gameplay such as “Chaos Free For Alls” with eight players that could choose two allies—a playstyle not available on the official Battle.net servers. Christopher’s “always on” landline connection also meant that the community could remain active 24/7. According to Matthew, such organization would not have been possible with strangers.

Christopher’s tale of hosting the ABCnet server mirrored that of John’s as host of The Event, as detailed later, in at least one way: over time both began to feel that hosting was more of an obligation than a true desire. Eventually, people drifted away from ABCnet, because they could not play WC3 on the emulator and others simply had no interest in WC3 at all (for reasons previously explored). Additionally, there was an influx of players on the Battle.net servers when WC3 was first released, which required less organization of events since people were always available to play. Although John was not a part of the ABCnet era, Jose suggested that when John did arrive and began hosting Events, players became reliant on him for organization.

XY lost members in the years immediately after the release of WC3 in 2002, but remained somewhat static between the transition from WC3 to SC2 in 2010. However,
The Event is only linked to the website today by the posts John produces about his arcade maps. Matthew suggested that he and other veterans such as Jose frequented XY and weekly Events less often due, in part, to the abundance of forgettable maps. For example, they felt that John, who created two of the most popular maps played during The Event throughout WC3 and SC2, was not particularly open to improving one of his maps in ways they felt would benefit it. For his part, John suggested that, along with the desire to maintain control over his content and a lack of interest in certain proposed changes, it is impossible to please everyone. In addition to this perceived lack of new, quality content, Jose suggested that he, Matthew, and Jeffrey (the most competitive player in the group) often had to find new ways to make the game enjoyable for themselves due to their superior skill level in the games compared to the influx of new players. All of these factors combined resulted in the decreasing popularity of XY as a website, concurrent with a decline in popularity of SC2 as a space for content creators and RTS enthusiasts in general. However, the swift decay of XY, WC3, and SC2’s populations led to the ascension of new spaces where gamers could reliably play, such as The Event, as detailed below.

Finally, it should be noted that towards the end of my fieldwork experience Christopher implemented a massive overhaul of the XY forums, and several current XY members who do not regularly play SC2 with the group showed up to special weekly Events dedicated to playing the older WC3. John has considered rotating weekly Events between SC2 and WC3, and a couple of older players even pondered the idea of returning to finish old custom maps that they had abandoned years before. However, some of the
current Event regulars opted out of playing WC3, and instead chose to play SC2 separately due to not owning WC3 or simply not enjoying it as much as SC2. Still, the minor resurgence towards community participation suggests that community building is an ongoing process that ebbs and flows, and that ultimately, players do have an interest in sustaining their communities.

**Uniqueness of the Group**

The length of time that this group has existed ironically presents challenges for making this research applicable to a broad range of field sites and research questions. One participant, William, suggested that some gaming groups have lasted for years like the SC2 group—for example, raiding groups in WoW, offline Dungeons and Dragons groups, and professional eSports teams. However, according to William, “groups that meet and converse through live chat while playing online games” have only been possible since the millennium due to the timeline of technological innovation. Additionally, John agrees that the group is unique, because “not many would want to hold an event as long as [he] did.” Although other long-term gaming groups certainly exist, it is unclear how common they are—especially within RTS games more broadly and SC2 more specifically. Still, my research group is relevant, because this research is intended to broaden the current anthropological research on gaming in general. This data can also be used for future comparative studies. In other words, this sample of gaming culture highlights the diversity of gaming communities when compared to previous studies such as those on WoW and SL.

**Communities within Communities**
A major division within the larger SC2 community exists between professional players and casual players (as represented by my research participants) — although the two certainly overlap. The casual community, in particular, is further demarcated by type of playstyle: melee and arcade. Melee is essentially a playstyle where two or more opponents are pitted against one another with the objective of destroying one another’s bases. Custom maps can be created for melee matches that offer different terrains. Arcade, on the other hand, allows for different game rules, and represents the type of play that my participants partook in during The Event. Blizzard also now allows for "extension mods," which change the base rules of melee maps without significantly changing the entire game as is generally done in arcade maps. For example, an extension mod for a melee map may increase the cost of a Marine unit from 50 minerals to 100 minerals, which would add to the length of a game as minerals are the basic "in-game currency" that allows players to purchase units needed to proceed with the game's objectives. In contrast, an arcade map may change the objective of the game from destroying an opponent's base to racking up the highest kill count in a set amount of time. According to John, the introduction of extension mods means that within the melee community there are now groups who play “pure melee” versus “modified melee.” Most players prefer either melee or arcade maps, which means that members of each group are necessarily not playing with one another equally — with the exception of those who spend roughly half of their time playing each style.

This type of breakdown within SC2 represents a small-world network as described by Shirky (2008) in which members predominantly belong to either the pure
melee, modified melee, or arcade clusters by virtue of time spent playing those styles of maps. However, these groups are connected due to the nature of many players who "bridge" between groups and play more than one style. According to Shirky, these networks are densely connected so that “if anyone drops out of the group . . . none of the other links between people would be disrupted . . . [and] large groups are sparsely connected” (2008:215). This pattern is seen in SC2 where the broader “StarCraft community” is large and sparsely connected—so that if Player A, who knows Players B and C, were to quit playing, Players B and C may no longer have any degree of connection between them. More narrowly, SC2 groups like those my participants belong to are densely connected—even if Player A were to leave the game, Players B and C are likely to know one another independently of Player A and therefore remain connected after Player A’s departure. According to Shirky, networks of these kind “mean that people don’t simply connect at random. They connect in clusters, ensuring that they interact with the same people frequently, even in large networks. This in turn . . . helps create social capital” (2008:222). That is, small groups, like the one explored in my research, provide the foundation for group cohesion that, when paired with other small groups and intermediate communities such as the melee and arcade clusters of players, “create social capital” to sustain the overall SC2 community. In other words, small groups overlap with each other as a sort of built-in redundancy. If my participants were to stop attending The Event it is likely that many of them would cease to play SC2 entirely due to the lack of social networks that practically make playing the game possible.

12 Solo play and professional play could be included in their own way, but are not for the purpose of avoiding additional complexity of this discussion.
However, The Event itself does not sustain the SC community, but relies on other smaller communities, such as professional players, to maintain the relevency of SC. Logically, this phenomenon can be extended outward to apply to SC within RTS games and RTS games within video games more broadly.

A Portrait of a Gamer

The history of the XY group generalizes the experiences of a diversity of players. However, my participants have been involved with the XY website, The Event, and the research group for varying lengths of time and in vastly different ways. Therefore, this section is an attempt to provide a “snapshot” of the type of participant attending The Event in my research. In a sense, this information explains, indirectly, who is included and excluded in online gaming communities. Although my interviewees shared striking similarities, this comparison should be taken in with an ounce of skepticism. That is, I selectively interviewed a certain segment of the group: those who have historically been most involved in the community and who are therefore relatively older than some of the newer members of the group. Therefore, it is unsurprising that certain patterns emerged. It should also be noted that this portrait is based more on players’ relationship to SC and The Event—and less on personal characteristics such as geographical location, race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and so on. Although this type of information was revealed in an incomplete picture during casual conversations and interviews, it is not the focus of this research. It was also impossible to gather complete data on such characteristics due to the taboo nature of asking about personally identifying information on the Internet in general, and specifically when a group includes minors.
How Long and How Often

Three of my interviewees are considered current regulars of The Event. John, the host of The Event, has been “around the community” for over ten years, and has participated in The Event through SC1, WC3, and SC2—moving to each game as they were newly released. Shortly after the release of SC2 John advertised The Event on the XY website, and in 2010 William responded to his thread on the topic. William was not a part of the WC3 Events, but based on his length of membership he is described as a regular by other participants. James has been participating in The Event since SC1, but with less frequency than John. In contrast, Christopher, Jose, Timothy, Jeffrey, and Matthew, whom I interviewed in relation to XY, are no longer regulars of The Event, but between The Event and XY each has been involved with the group for a long period of time relative to the overall lifespan of the community. This information suggests there are multiple paths to being considered a core member of a group.

Interviewees varied based on how much they actually play SC2. Despite leading The Event, John revealed that he does not play SC2 outside of the weekly gathering. Working on his custom map is the only reason for him to otherwise run SC2 outside of The Event. He suggested his relative lack of game time was due to the “less interesting maps” in SC2 compared to SC1 and WC3. James rarely plays SC2 outside of The Event as well, and actually increased participation in The Event due directly to his involvement in this research. William, on the other hand, plays SC2 “a lot more than almost anyone who goes to the event” and he tends “to chase in-game leader boards in little bursts,”

\[13\] This was the same “event” that participants were attending during SC1 and WC3, but a new event name was created for each game. This research employs “The Event” to describe all of them collectively.
rather than play traditional melee. Overall, it appears that not many participants play the SC2 base game outside of The Event, which highlights how important The Event is for the existence of this group.

Gaming Beyond StarCraft

All of my participants have of course played SC1, WC3, and/or SC2 at some point. For John, these games influenced his interest in PC games more generally. Outside of SC2 he largely prefers anime games, and he occasionally plays on a PS3 console due to his affection for several role-playing games (RPGs) such as Disgaea 3 and 4. William also concentrated on PC games, but mentioned that he enjoys more casual phone and online flash games such as AdVenture Capitalist and Boom Beach. Overall, he enjoys “time delayed” games, which involve playing in short bursts instead of requiring a large time commitment at once. James, in contrast, plays a more extensive assortment of games across multiple platforms. Generally, many of my participants were comfortable with PC gaming due to growing with games like SC1, WC3, and SC2. However, they differed based on the extent and variety of non-PC games they play. This information actually supports the conclusion that gaming communities are not discrete or isolated. Instead, gamers generally engage in an array of game spaces.

Socializing Beyond The Event

Interviewees indicated that they interacted little with other group members outside of The Event. According to William, with John he “designed the terrain for Macro Strategies and since then [John has] been [William's] 'feed' for updates to the game.”

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14 Anime is a style of animation developed in Japan, and anime games may employ action/adventure, drama, horror, science fiction, and progressive elements (Aeschliman 2007).
Additionally, John ironically, despite being the host of The Event, described himself as an introvert who only talks to people that he has known for a long time. He is comfortable hosting The Event, because he has played with many of the participants for years, and because he is in control of choosing maps. This point is relevant to community building, because John has not been an extroverted personality outside of The Event and thus has not attempted to draw people to The Event. Indeed, introversion was a common personality trait among many of my participants.

_Beyond XY_

As discussed, participants largely agreed that _XY_ is chiefly an archive site today. Therefore, I was curious as to whether or not they substituted _XY_ with more active gaming related online spaces. John did not, but William has made 5,928 posts (4 posts a day) on a text based _Dungeons and Dragons_ forum/game site since 2011! James has been more active with video game sites in general, with a focus on gaming news sites and general online forums such as Reddit that cater to specific gaming topics. This data suggests that members of online gaming communities vary in how much they utilize “non-game gaming” spaces. However, my research did not point to whether or not these differences affected how members fit into the _SC2_ community. If anything, community membership is pliable regardless of other games members play or non-games spaces they frequent.

_The Event Through Five Players_

McGonigal (2011) argues, “truly epic games are always attached to large, online player communities,” (101) because they require that players can act within a collective
context and with a sense of service to other players. She describes projects, such as wikis, as the product of this type of community. Custom content such as arcade maps and the XY forums are examples of projects undertaken by my participants. Inspired by McGonigal’s work on projects I chose to create a series of graphs to spatially represent group membership. The concept of “lore” is meaningful in gaming, and just as games and characters have their own histories and back stories so do the communities playing those games. Therefore, I decided that creating these graphs would be an appropriate way to give back to my research group, who themselves are passionate about creating custom content for SC1, WC3, and SC2. Below, I offer examples of data for five of the players I interviewed, which represents how often individuals were present at The Event from August, 2010 to May, 2015 (roughly the timeframe of SC2).

Fig. 1 - 5 depict the frequency with which each member has attended The Event every month. This data was analyzed by “reading” code from saved replays that were created in-game by players. One of my participants, James, created a program in the programming language Python that allowed this data to be extracted and read. The replays were gathered from several players such as John, Scott, Robert, and Matthew who had saved recordings on their computers over many years. This group effort was necessary due to technological limitations and human actions. SC2 allows players to save video footage of games using the game’s software. However, John records The Event in real-time using a program called FRAPS, and then uploads his videos to YouTube. YouTube videos were not readable by my program. Additionally, John, Robert, and several other members who were asked to contribute replays each had gaps in their
collection due to computer crashes or failures to attend The Event during certain weeks.

As such, my project for the community became in itself a project by the community.

Figure. 1 Percentage of Events Attended per Month by John

Figure. 2 Percentage of Events Attended per Month by William
Figure 3: Percentage of Events Attended per Month by James

Figure 4: Percentage of Events Attended per Month by Matthew
Figure. 5 Percentage of Events Attended per Month by Frank

The title of each graph includes the pseudonym of each player that the data represents. The X-axis lists the month and year in chronological order. These graphs represent only a portion of The Event’s timeline due to incomplete records of replays, which means that players who were present during SCI and/or WC3, but not SC2 are underrepresented. The Y-axis shows what percentage of Events players attended. Because The Event is held once a week, each month has four to five Events that count towards a player’s attendance rate. Therefore, missing an Event during a month with only four Events total will hurt a player’s attendance percentage more than missing an Event during a month with five Events total. A quick glance at each graph, and in comparison to each other, provides a snapshot of how frequently players have attended The Event. For example, Fig. 1 shows that The Event’s host, John, has attended every single Event since
the group’s inception.\textsuperscript{15} In contrast, \textit{Fig. 2} shows that William had two noticeable dips in his attendance rate from March to May and September to October of 2012. Through interviews, I was able to verify that these absences were caused by a melted video card, which is a malfunction of a computer component making the game inoperable, and later a shift to playing a newly released game called \textit{Diablo 3}. These breaks in attendance represent two reasons a person may leave an online gaming group: technological issues and the appeal of new games.

\textit{Fig. 3} shows James’ attendance rate, which ebbs and flows over time. Matthew, who is a long time member of \textit{XY} is underrepresented in \textit{Fig. 4}, because he largely stopped playing with the group after the release of \textit{SC2}. In contrast, \textit{Fig. 5} shows that Frank is a relatively new member of the group. Interestingly, each of these players was considered either a regular and/or part of the old guard despite clear differences in attendance rates. The conclusion I have drawn from this discrepancy is that online gaming communities are distinctive compared to some offline communities due to the increasing ease of preserving historical information: even though Matthew no longer attends The Event, players are aware of his contributions to the group through \textit{XY}, in particular. Likewise, players like James and William can fluctuate in their presence without losing status in the group due to commitment spread out over a relatively long period of the group’s existence. Finally, new players like Frank can increase status by attending Events regularly near and up to the present period. These data alone do not

\textsuperscript{15} However, this data is slightly inaccurate, because the bulk of replays used for this data came from John. There are a handful of weeks in which John was not present, but it is not counted against him since there is no data for those weeks.
explain *why* players stopped or started playing *SC2*, and qualitative data such as interviews cannot always provide accurate and reliable information such as exact dates of attendance. Together, however, both sets of data provide a clear—although not fully consistent picture of the group over time.

Not represented by these figures, but found in my data, is that many players listed as members on the *XY* page in *SC2* have only attended a single Event. From this information it is easy enough to extract who the core group is within the larger *XY* group. The core group consists of players who have played the greatest number of games over the longest period of time. However, the core group has shifted over time as well-established players have come and gone. Therefore, it is important to remember that “membership” does not imply “equal membership.”

The data I gathered for my Python program cover from August 2010–May 2015,\(^\text{16}\) and in addition to the above discussion, are useful for determining:

1) The total number of people who have attended The Event (148) and the average number of people at each Event (9)

2) The percentage of total Events an individual has attended (e.g., 100% for The Event’s host John versus only 38.98% for another long-time regular like James.)

3) The total time of all Events (703 hours) and the average length of each Event (3:58:33)

\(^\text{16}\) This data includes 2,114 successful replay reads, and excludes 135 broken replays (recordings of games that the program could not process into readable data). Additionally, the most popular maps were determined by adding up the number of games played on each *version* of that map. For example, *Soldiers and Shopkeepers* was updated by John and uploaded with two different names. The program records each versions as a different map. One version was played 34 times, and the other was played 24 times—for a total of 58 plays.
4) The most commonly played maps (John’s map *Soldiers and Shopkeepers* 58 times, the non-XY map *Nexus Squadron Strike* 49 times, and John’s map *Macro and Strategies* 48 times)

The relevance of this information for understanding community is twofold. First, the information is simply interesting to my participants. As part of this research, James posted our findings on *XY* for other group members to view and they were, unsurprisingly given previous attempts to archive the history of the site, quite receptive. Second, this form of knowledge is useful for game companies. It tells us *how* players exist in online gaming communities. Combined with qualitative data that tells us *why*, games companies can explore ways to keep their consumer base intact, or even expanding. These figures clearly show that some *SC2* players are more committed to the game than others, that the arcade community is responsive to certain types of maps and game features, and that players are organizing themselves into interesting and fluid forms of communities of play. Game companies can use this information to their advantage to make games *better* for the gamers.
CHAPTER THREE: TECHNICAL BACKGROUND

Shirky (2008) has shown that society creates new forms of groups as communications technology advances. New technology, in particular, has “radically altered the old limits on the size, sophistication, and scope of unsupervised effort” (Shirky 2008:21). This new form of organization is ubiquitous in online gaming due to the role of the Internet and the practice of gaming with individuals in geographically distant locations. In this chapter, I will briefly describe various forms of technology used by participants in this research in order to connect and communicate with one another.

Text Chat

Text chat is the main way that members communicate. SC2 did not have chat channels (as used by my participants) for quite awhile. Matthew and others recalled Blizzard openly mocking players by responding to complaints about the lack of this feature with, “Do you really want chat rooms?” As my research shows, chat channels are vital to the continued existence of the SC2 community. Before and after a game players most often congregate in the private XY chatroom. However, the XY chat channel is independent of an active game. Usually players in a match will speak to each other in-game, but those not playing may continue talking in the XY chatroom to anyone who has access to the private channel (which includes those who are in-game).
Additionally, SC2 has a lobby chat built in, which *does* require participation in a game, and appears in a separate window just prior to the beginning of a match. Multiple conversations commonly occurred simultaneously in both the lobby and XY chat channels, which participants suggested was a flawed system responsible for creating more confusion than cohesion. However, the private XY channel does create greater group consistency by allowing members not actively involved in a game to maintain contact with those who are. John felt positively about this feature, because it allows players to connect to both one another and events otherwise outside of their perception. During the early WC3 days of the group there was no chat crossover between players who were and were not part of a game—so if a player showed up late they would have to contact another player via private message and were otherwise left out of the conversation. Despite the general desire to be connected, players can also choose to set their availability status to “busy,” which mutes all outside chat during a game. John suggested that using the busy feature is useful for popular players who do not want to “see chat of every random fan on the planet.” Overall, the change in chat communication after the release of WC3, which allowed players to more easily speak to one another, increased connectivity, but also created a more labor intensive process for participants trying to manage chat channels. In other words, being connected increases social capital as social networks are able to expand, but it also multiplies the complexity of maintaining that social capital due to the size and breadth of modern social networks.

In-game chat is the only default form of communication for players if they are actually participating in a match. For example, one player, Thomas, owned the starter
edition of SC2. The “starter edition” of SC2 essentially involves downloading the game without buying it. The free download allows basic functionality, but excludes chat outside of the game. In order to communicate with the rest of the group, Thomas was required to join a private party with another player, in this case John, who then relayed Thomas’s messages to the regular chat—however, this type of setup is inconvenient for all involved. Despite its otherwise ubiquity, text chat in-game can be difficult for the uninitiated to follow. During games players often must type quickly, which means they may use poor grammar and rely on short phrases that are difficult for new players to understand. Fortunately, I had a participant ready to translate for me at all times, but learning the “native language” of gamers should not be seen as a trivial task.

Finally, my participants most commonly communicate through text chat entirely outside of SC2. Talking to one another inside the game is limited, because The Event only occurs one night a week. Instead, many group members—both those who currently play SC2 and those who represent the XY old guard—talk to one another through the instant messaging client AIM (American Online Instant Messenger). AIM was released in 1997, and by 2006 accounted for over 50% of instant messaging subscribers (Hester 2006). However, the software makes up only 1% of the market today (OPSWAT 2011). My participants acknowledged, some increduously, that they use dated technology to communicate with one another, but they also stated its usefulness. For example, Jerry and Christopher agreed that the program is practical for organizing games, conducting group chats, and keeping in touch with older members who are seen less frequently on XY or in games. Furthermore, John, Jerry, Matthew, and others suggested that AIM, specifically,
has outlasted competing means of communication, such as the MSN instant messaging application or Skype, due to its basic functionality and lack of advertisements. Most importantly, players have saved years worth of contact information on their AIM accounts, and the service is known as the place to find other group members.

**Ventrilo**

Ventrilo is a voice chat program outside of SC2 that a majority of group members have installed, although many use it to listen to other players and do not speak themselves during The Event. Ventrilo was not available until 2002, which is representative of Shirky’s principle that new technology allows for new types of group formation. The master list of players in Ventrilo, used by participants of The Event, is for the more broad XY community in general. Indeed, Timothy, Jerry, Matthew, and Jose each emphasized the importance of Ventrilo as a space where group members can casually converse and maintain community bonds outside of The Event. However, there are also different subgroups, called channels, within the master list of members based on different games. These channels appear the same for everyone on this particular server and are set up by the person in charge of the server being used, in this case, a player named Christopher, who is also the current owner of the XY website. The Ventrilo channels are for the games: *StarCraft, League of Legends* (with further sub-channels), *Hearthstone, Minecraft, Warcraft, Diablo*, and Green Room (previously used for creating podcasts). These sub-channels occasionally change depending on need. Players may only be active in one channel at a time, which limits who they can speak to. However, some players, such as Jesse, will open multiple instances of Ventrilo to allow themselves access to every
channel at once. In Jesse’s case, she can hear and speak to everyone, but those she is interacting with cannot hear what she is saying to people in the other channels.

The main benefit of voice chat is that it allows players to more easily communicate during a game when their hands are otherwise busy; voice chat can be activated by a single button. However, because the channels are segregated, players who want to talk with other XY members or friends who are not playing SC2 during The Event will have to find alternative means for communicating with them. Additionally, not all players have Ventrilo installed on their computers. William, for one, often voiced his frustration at players, especially regulars, who lagged behind the group by not adopting voice chat. Players were also at a disadvantage by not using Ventrilo. For instance, during one custom map game the creator of the map was present, but could not hear what others were saying via voice chat. At one point, he asked, using text chat: “Is everyone in voice asking about why there are so many black holes?”—a reference to a game mechanism players were having trouble with. In this case, receiving feedback from all the players was highly relevant for this map creator, but he was not fully integrated into the community system. Therefore, he missed out on valuable opinions about his work and the opportunity to improve his content, which is the major goal of many mapmakers.

Although players will generally “translate” for one another by providing voice chat information to text chat only users, it is not as efficient as everyone having access to the same communication platforms. Ultimately, however, text and voice chat represent a progression in modern technology that has led to changes in the way people communicate and groups form.
YouTube

One feature of forming communities online is the effort that goes into “gathering” members in one place at one time. This congregation is particularly tricky when members physically reside in different time zone areas or if members have no way to contact one another outside of SC2. YouTube is an example of how “both digital media and embodied knowledge can bridge space and time, creating connections between dispersed and diverse individual human experiences” (Miller 2012:4). Although players in my research group most frequently experienced sociality via real-time gameplay, it was not always possible for players to be available during the weekly scheduled Event. YouTube videos, however, offer players both inside and outside of the group a way to participate in the community without necessarily being present with every other player.

John, The Event’s host, originally made replays, by recording in-game using the game’s software, available starting with WC3, but only 2–3 people were watching them at the time. John decided to start uploading videos to YouTube around 2010 in order to make his replays more available. Since then he has uploaded over 500 videos, which have received over 635,000 views. His YouTube channel has nearly 600 subscribers. John’s YouTube videos became important at a time when “older regulars decided to bail out” and participation during The Event dropped “from 8–10 to like 3–4” people. According to John, “a good 50–75% of the newcomers came from watching [his] YouTube videos. Bringing the number back to 8–10 or even 12–14.” He felt that, in a way, his YouTube videos saved The Event, and William agreed that The Event “expanded primarily because of [John’s] YouTube [channel].” Ultimately, I did sense that the community extends to
YouTube, even if only marginally. For example, one night John asked the group to play a map called *Big Brother*—“if only because the author over at YouTube wanted us to try his updated version.”

Additionally, John felt that YouTube videos are “more immortal compared to replays that are saved in the game, because the older in-game videos can become incompatible as the technology progresses.” In other words, YouTube is much more popular and likely to maintain video compatibility over time compared to the video recording features within any single game—which tend to become outdated after game engines are improved and new games are released. Although John is personally invested in his YouTube videos, because he is their creator, he suggested that he was more interested in preserving his games than necessarily drawing a large and new audience to The Event with them. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of digital media for expanding community.

Chronologically prior to, but parallel in spirit to, John’s experience with YouTube and The Event, Matthew suggested that many people approached *XY* from his own videos, and that those who visited the site for custom content largely did so for *SC* content. Matthew started producing videos, and eventually had around 1,200 subscribers (many of which he described as bots), which encouraged John to make videos as well. Matthew performs actual casting, which is when a narrator discusses games that have already been played. For example, Matthew tends to focus on technical aspects of games such as why a certain unit behaves the way it does. In contrast, John posts more-or-less raw video from The Event with his voice narrating only in the sense that he chats to other
players during games. Matthew and John’s videos attracted different types of players. Matthew’s subscribers consisted more of melee players who were not interested in the type of arcade maps played during The Event. They were more likely to end up at XY in search of custom campaigns. John’s viewers, in contrast, were more likely to drop in on The Event, instead of XY, because they were interested in playing arcade maps with others or were mapmakers themselves who yearned for an audience for their creations.

Matthew described his experience with YouTube in similar terms as players who described the map selection screen in SC2: a snowball effect in which popular casters become more popular by the nature of being slightly more popular than everyone else to begin with. YouTube shows “featured channels” and promotes them to users, and Matthew said that this format is similar across many casting sites. Eventually, Matthew moved away from YouTube due to censorships issues and technical issues with Flash, and towards sites that are more directly dedicated to casting.

Ultimately, YouTube, like the XY website, represents a non-game space that shatters the illusion of “the magic circle” (Caillois 1961). With the ascendance of Web 2.0 (of which YouTube is a part) and collaborative online projects like wikis and forums, gamers have more opportunities to build gaming communities than they did in the past. However, Matthew's and John’s differing experiences with the technology that is being used in this process shows that players enter with diverse motivations and do not necessarily work towards a common goal.
CHAPTER FOUR: ARCADE MAPS AND COMMUNITY BUILDING

During the course of my fieldwork I depended on my participants to teach me how to overcome technological barriers to group participation. My own desktop computer was ancient and decrepit, by PC gaming standards, and I often used my key informant’s computer, Battle.net account, and instant messaging service account to enter my fieldsite. Therefore, it was unsurprising when I intercepted an in-game chat communication intended for James while learning how to play SC2 through the solo campaign. The text message was a link from John, which directed James and I to John’s popular Macro and Strategies map. James explained that John’s map was an “interesting example of community,” because Macro and Strategies allows other players to “open it up and create scenarios to share with each other.” Essentially, John created a map open for modification by other players to then share with even more players.

According to James, many maps over the years have been sent back-and-forth to members of the group—with different people working on certain parts of each map. Golub (2010) suggests that “what makes games truly ‘real’ for players is the extent to which they create collective projects of action that people care about” (18). Building objects in Second Life or raiding in World of Warcraft are examples of projects, according to Golub (2010:40). Bainbridge (2010) further suggests, “Non-game virtual worlds [such as SL] are in some respects the opposite of strategy games [such as SC2]
because they use the online environment primarily for cooperative rather than competitive purposes” (2). However, I use Golub’s concept of projects to understand the creation of arcade maps in SC2 as a collective action that solidifies group cohesion by giving players something to care about. Below, I provide a brief example of how an arcade game, as experienced by my participants, works:

The main game screen shows the name of the map *Earth Battles*, which was created by an *XY* group member named Michael. This screen also displays various settings for playing the map, the organization of teams, and a chat room. As the map is loading players can view any special rules for playing *Earth Battles*—a feature found on many, but not all, map loading screens. John narrates via Ventrilo, and describes the name, basic premise, and creator of the map. He does this for the benefit of those playing, but also to provide context for his YouTube videos. The game begins, but soon after players commence with complaints about how broken the map is: “Fuck I got nothing,” “I'M BROKED,” “Did they actually make it worse than before? . . . it is so bugged we cannot do anything,” and “I'm glad I didn’t join?”. The response seems harsh on the surface, and the criticism continues into the *XY* chat channel when the game is completed. The map’s creator, Michael, is present for the discussion. John scolds Michael for not having assessed his map for functionality prior to submitting it for play by the group, and explains to Michael that he had exhausted his opportunities for testing *Earth Battles* during this week’s Event. Michael attempts to defend himself by arguing that he cannot test his map without access to participants to play it, which for him, requires The Event. In response, John suggests that Michael submit his map for play during the following week’s Event. Alternatively, John offers to accept Michael’s map during 1v1 (when only two people play together) for evaluation, but not again during The Event when everyone in the group is trying to productively play.

Michael temporarily leaves to work on his map after his exchange with the other players. John shifts the topic by stating, “At this point, I’ll let democracy decide” which map to try next. He allows other players to voice their opinions by asking whether or not the group wants to give Michael’s map another chance. The group agrees, and the second time around *Earth Battles* appears fixed. However, John and other players continue to provide critique throughout the game. For example, one participant tells Michael that he should not expect anyone to hover over the “tip bar,” which tells people how to actually play the map. Still others advise Michael frankly that “this map sucks.” Yet John and Michael in
particular use emoticons such as “XD” to indicate that they are being lighthearted with one another, and Michael sincerely concludes the conversation: “Thanks for the feedback.”

John’s map *Macro and Strategies*, which is played next, allows players to build scenarios inside the map. Players can use these scenarios to test different settings or set up mini-challenges and games. *Macro and Strategies* is a work in progress, like Michael's *Earth Battles*, and is likewise exposed to criticism. For example, players wonder why it is so difficult to identify an enemy unit without directly clicking on their image, or kill them without approaching so closely as to be right on top of them. Still, these critiques are much less harsh than those received by Michael, because *Macro and Strategies* is more sophisticated than *Earth Battles*. For instance, *Macro and Strategies* allows players to choose from over 250 different scenarios, and create scenarios on their own or collectively as a group online. William, a long-time member, adds that John’s map would benefit from a “favorites list” that allows players to easily sort through the vast number of scenarios available in the map. In the weeks that followed, John did in fact make the changes suggested to him by the rest of the group.

This small excerpt is typical of *The Event*. Although players can be critical with their feedback they are rarely cruel. For example, after my participants played another of his maps, Michael inquired as to whether or not the group found it enjoyable. Despite offering commentary during the game few players responded to his question, and when they did, they trod lightly:

   David: Problems aside, it’s kinda interesting.

   John: Well, at least it feels a bit different.

   James: Michael, I liked the idea of having some control over my units as they are marching toward the enemy base, but my main thought the entire time was “Why are my units standing behind the [Command Center] for 20 minutes?”

Interactions like these show that although “critique” and “the project” are important to my *SC2* participants, neither is worth upsetting a healthy group dynamic.
Finally, the maps played during The Event do not always originate from XY group members, but critique and feedback are generally provided by participants for every map played. Maps created by XY members are also accessible to SC2 players outside of the group, and even non-Event participants offer evaluations of these maps. For example, XY member Kenneth’s map *Big Brother* contains reviews by several players outside of the XY group:

Richard: This game will test your strategy, teamwork, and skill . . . Watch others to learn . . .

Charles: Definitely a lot of potential here. I have only been able to play with a couple of friends, due to the lack of players . . .

These two comments are merely a sample of the many reviews found for maps in SC2, and are representative of the more positive assessments given. It is also telling that both reviews reference the community. Charles does not have access to the core XY group, and therefore presumably does not participate in a pre-set “event” where members are readily available to play any selected map. Instead, he must rely on the general SC2 lobbies to find or be matched into a game with other “anonymous” players. Indeed, James suggested that playing SC2 without a group is “like a barren wasteland.” Still, Charles is connected to the XY group via access to their maps and the feedback system.

**Map Selection as Proxy for Group Selection**

Map selection also reflects Shirkey's (2008) argument that new forms of technology, such as the Internet, make “it easier for groups to self-assemble and for individuals to contribute to group effort without requiring formal management” (21). My
research group represents a modern evolution of community born from these types of technology, and it also relies on a certain degree of informal management. As current host of The Event, John’s responsibilities include finding a consensus amongst participants, or otherwise choosing which maps to play himself, and inviting players to actually join a game. Rarely, another player will host a map due to technological issues or time delays on John’s end—but the infrequency of these occurrences makes it clear that other players do not act with the same social authority as John and can be described more accurately as placeholder hosts. The ways in which maps are chosen highlights how technological limitations and concepts of negotiation shape and mold who is included and excluded from group participation.

Most significantly, *SC2* maps vary by how many players can participate and whether or not additional “observation” seats are available.\(^\text{17}\) When The Event is particularly well populated, it becomes difficult for John to choose maps that can accommodate all players who are present in the lobby. The most a map in *SC2* can host is 15 players, but nearly 100 members formally belong to the *XY* group on Battle.net. Maps that allow for the maximum capacity of players are rare, and often result in glitches due to the complexity and demand created by such a large load. Despite the difficulty of finding a sizeable map, John often passes over those that do not offer enough space for everyone to play—even if doing so means waiting longer to play or passing over maps

\(^\text{17}\) Occasionally, a player does not want to join a game, but wishes to still view the match. Sometimes players stream matches (real-time video recorded from the perspective of the player hosting the stream), which allows non-participants to watch. However, the quality of streams is generally poorer than if a player were to watch from an observer slot in the game. Additionally, watching a stream usually does not allow viewers to interact with other players other than the streamer—unless they use Ventrilo or private messaging. Most arcade maps do not provide observer seats.
that the group as a whole would prefer. Occasionally, more than 15 players attend The Event. In one instance, a member named Donald offered to establish a second lobby in order to divide the total number of players into two more easily managed groups. Therefore, everyone would have the opportunity to play without waiting. However, John responded to Donald’s motion: “2 groups = 2nd group tends to fade away and lose half group.” In this case, technology directly limited the size of the group, because SC2 is programmed to only allow 15 players in one game. As John suggests, dividing the group in order to work around technological limitations may lead to decreased participation in the community by those who are not a part of the “core” group.

Negotiation and Sacrifice in Map Selection

Shirky (2008) suggests that “the cost of all kinds of group activity—sharing, cooperation, and collective action [from easiest to hardest] . . . have fallen thanks to new technology” (47). Cooperating requires players to synchronize their behavior with other players, which my participants achieve by coming together weekly at a specific time. However, as previously stated, gathering players in one place, at one time, is difficult due to differences in time zones and lack of communication outside of the central meeting area—in this case, The Event. This barrier to community building often results in negotiations about whether or not the group should wait for certain members to be present before beginning to play. These negotiations frequently take into account how often the member is normally present, when they usually arrive, their relationship to the map being played, and so on. For instance:

Anthony (Clan1234): So. I wonder when Donald is going to wake up.
Brian (RipClan): Anyone want to do *Nebula Forces*?

Anthony (Clan1234): Donald isn’t on yet.

Brian (RipClan): Doesn’t mean we can’t do *Nebula Forces*.

Anthony (Clan1234): Usually we wait until he’s here, because he brings updates.

And he would probably want to do testing with the release being in 3 days.

In this example, Brian’s map choice was denied, because its creator, Donald, was not present. In contrast to a technological barrier, the map selection decision was culturally based: Donald would miss the opportunity to receive feedback on his map from the group, and the group would not have access to the most recent updates for Donald’s map. However, it is not always relevant to the selection process whether or not a map’s creator is present, because the group often plays maps made by players who never attend The Event.

There are several reasons for the amount of negotiation conducted between matches over which map will be played next. Some participants can only play for a short period, because they must leave for offline activities—which makes long maps unfeasible. Others simply do not like the features of certain maps or will refuse to play if they feel they are not particularly skilled at a certain type of map style. John must also take into consideration who will be allowed to play given space constraints, and how to organize teams. One conversation clearly shows the frustration players experience based on the technological limits of the game to be inclusive of all members of the group as well as the type of negotiations that occur over who should be included or excluded:
John: Thing is, still can’t fit every player. :p So I guess… who is willing to be a sacrifice? For the greater good.

Edward: SC2 should be able to support 40 players in the same lobby.

John: Donald . . . we already have too many players in this channel. Can’t fit Ronald on top of it.

Michael: If we sacrifice for this game, can our suggested map be played sooner?

David: It can barely stand 15 players, Edward. Unless they improve the engine it won’t work.

John: And now it's like I have to choose between Edward, Anthony, Mark and Thomas. For the last slot.

John takes map selection seriously for “The Event’s survival in the long term.” If he continues to ignore players who suggest maps it is likely that they will “just leave for good at some point.” Therefore, his decisions unsurprisingly, albeit only slightly, benefit regulars, because the most frequent players are the “core” part of the group that maintain The Event long-term. As a result, “sacrifice” is a common term used in negotiations to determine who will get to play. A further example:

Michael: I’d like to play Big Brother if we can all fit.

John: That was the idea. :p But we have 1 too many . . .
William: If George won’t play then I can leave so David’s map is played.

John: Seems it will be Big Brother with William willing to sacrifice himself for the greater good.

Although John considers all requests, he ultimately must make a decision. With his resolutions he attempts to be as inclusive as possible, but otherwise invokes ideas of “sacrifice” to make exclusion more palatable.

Shirky (2008) defines collective action as that which “requires a group of people to commit themselves to undertaking a particular effort together, and to do so in a way that makes the decision of the group binding on the individual members” (51). Map selection is arguably a collective action, made possible by technological advances: players come to a consensus through open text and voice chat about which map to play, and once the compromise is made players are bound to playing the selected map—or not playing at all—and thus, relinquishing full participation. However, I found that even with an open forum and negotiation, the decision ultimately rested with the host, John. In the end, understanding who is included or excluded in online gaming communities requires looking at how group selection manifests itself (in this case, through map selection) and who makes those selections (in this case, the host, with input from the collective).
CHAPTER FIVE: FACILITATION OF AND BARRIERS TO COMMUNITY BUILDING

The previous chapters, which explored the history of the XY website and The Event, technological methods of communication, and the process of playing SC arcade maps, provide the necessary background information for understanding how community building can be both facilitated and prevented online. For instance, my group has existed for over ten years, but its membership has shifted significantly over that time. This transformation begs the questions of what it takes to join the group, why certain members have been retained for so long, and why others no longer participate in core group functions. Additionally, the specificity, complexity, and evolution of the technology used to interact and communicate with one another is key to understanding how community building occurs uniquely in online spaces. Finally, my description of arcade maps, gameplay, and community interactions allows us to explore the social and cultural influences on community building. Next, I turn to some of the most prominent factors that have impacted the ebb and flow of community building for my SC2 community.

Newbies: Gaining Group Membership

It was not unusual for new players to join the group during the course of my fieldwork, but as my quantitative data show, most “newbies” only attend a single Event. The novelty of a new screenname appearing in the XY chatroom meant that more long-term members would always inquire about the identities of unfamiliar players. For
example, one night, a new player named Raymond showed up at The Event. George asked Raymond “who he was,” and Raymond replied that William, a frequent attendant, had invited him. Raymond had made a map and suggested that William invited him so that the group would play it. However, Raymond, like most newcomers, did not have access to Ventrilo in order to voice chat with other players. He also did not immediately understand the “native language”—a struggle I faced myself as a “newb”:

George: lol
Gregory: XD
Mark: heh
Raymond: Hmm You guys are confusing. Wow.

John: We are the ArcadeExplorers . . . :p. It should kind of explain everything

This exchange illuminates several things about community building in SC2. First, access to the group is usually by word of mouth and invitation—someone sees a YouTube video, plays with one of the regulars outside of The Event and hears about it, and so on. Second, new players are not always immediately aware of group lore, such as the origin of the clan name or The Event’s connection to XY. Nor would inexperienced participants know about technologically specific forms of communication such as the Ventrilo service or private chat channel without being informed by other players who had already been through the process of integrating into the group. One participant stated that he prefers to have other players who use Ventrilo on his team during matches—for easier communication—and thus lacking such cultural knowledge to connect can actually be a hindrance to new players.
A third observation from this interaction is that new members are, for all intents and purposes, treated decently, but not automatically fully integrated into the group. That is, meeting people on the Internet is strikingly similar to meeting people offline: “getting to know” people is generally a gradual process that allows participants to eventually become a part of the community flow. For example, during one Event, a new, unknown player joined in and immediately began offering map suggestions, despite John’s explanations for why various maps were unpopular with the group. This player also tried to invite other players in the lobby to join a game (generally John’s job), but was rejected. The regulars did not take this player’s suggestions seriously, but they also did not remove him from the group or The Event. In other words, brand new members tend to be tolerated, even welcomed, but maintain a status slightly below everyone else as they learn and adapt to the group’s social milieu. Additionally, James explained that when The Event experiences a full house of eight to ten people that no regular would ever volunteer to forgo a game in order to provide a first-time player with the opportunity to participate.\textsuperscript{18} In other words, seniority, defined by the length of time committed to the group, is clearly favored—although never explicitly cited publicly during The Event. All of this is not to say that gaining group membership is impossible, but statistically speaking, the majority of new players only attend The Event for a single week. Far fewer have regularly participated within the past few years, and only a small handful have been present since the group was formed.

\textsuperscript{18} Technically, some maps can handle up to 15 players, but the majority of maps enjoyed by my participants hold 8–10 players—thus, map selection tends to become much more difficult when more than 10 members are present at The Event.
Regarding new players, John suggested that the most important factors that determine whether or not a player will be welcomed into the group are: the amount of lag they experience (technological barrier), their demeanor, and their ability to speak English (the common language of my participants). In other words, as long as a player can actually access the game through adequate technology, communicate with other members, and not behave as a nuisance, they will be accepted into the group. Of course, these criteria do place some unintended restrictions on who can participate in online gaming communities: members must have enough wealth to play SC2 on an up-to-date computer, must be literate in English even if it is not their native language, and should implicitly understand the cultural milieu of the group as to not appear annoying or outright unlikeable. These implied, rather than explicitly demanded, criteria contribute to the idea of online gaming communities as self-selecting communities, because those who cannot follow them will “naturally” be rejected from the group.

Technological Barriers

As previously alluded to through my discussion of text chat, voice chat, and the employment of YouTube videos, a unique aspect of studying communities online is the need for practically understanding special types of technology in order to gain access to and fully engage with research participants. However, anthropologically knowing an online gaming community requires a deeper understanding of the relationship between community and technology. Most obviously we can see that the Internet allows for some people to interact under some circumstances that they may not otherwise be able to, at least as conveniently. However, this common sense knowledge is not enough to say that
online communities are truly free, open, and uncontested as is so often depicted in the utopian view of the modern communication age (Gillespie 2007). Therefore, I turn next to several examples of what might be called “technological barriers” to community—both in terms of individual access to, and the more general formation and cohesion of, online gaming communities. These barriers are also relevant for a discussion on inscription, because they would not exist without a collusion (Schüll 2013) between producers, consumers, and technology.

“Slowdown Extreme!”

Perhaps the most common technological barrier to full participation in most online games is the prevalence of lag. Boellstorff (2010) describes lag as an “apparently banal [aspect] of cyber sociality with important theoretical implications for questions of place and time” (107). Lag is particularly relevant to Boellstorff, because he considers the act of going afk (away from keyboard) as “the clearest means of identifying a virtual world” (2010:112). That is, a world is virtual if you can step away from it. For the purposes of this discussion, however, I am more interested in the ways that lag serves as a barrier to community building. Furthermore, in this section, I use the term “lag” as a catchall for hardware slowdown and network latency (i.e., a bad Internet connection), which is how it is colloquially used in many gaming spaces.19

Lag was common in the arcade map games I watched, but the game fully crashed less frequently. A memory leak is one example of a technical issue that may lead to an

19 Bainbridge (2010) defines lag as “the delay caused by the need to send information between each player over the Internet and the central server that combines their actions and controls the game” (23).
extreme slowdown or total crash. There are several causes of memory leaks. For instance, during WC3, mapmakers had to manually indicate that when a unit dies it should be removed from the game’s memory. When a mapmaker failed to do so, more and more units were added to the map’s memory, which ultimately slowed down the game for everyone. However, participants felt that a memory leak was not entirely the mapmaker’s fault. Instead, they suggested that Blizzard should automatically prevent memory leaks from happening. In this case, lag is understood as a barrier inscribed by the game’s developers, but is also reinforced by decisions on the part of map creators.

Graphics provide another case of how Blizzard has potentially damaged the SC2 community by inscribing technological barriers. SC1 was a 2D game, and the natural progression in the series, and gaming in general, was to make SC2 3D—in terms of physics, but not mechanics. However, the game suffered from a loss of readability, which refers to how easy it is to tell visually what is happening on screen. Jose suggested that if Blizzard had created SC2 as 2D they would have been able to lower the system requirements to play the game—retaining more casual players who are unlikely to invest in an expensive gaming computer. As evidence for Jose’s claim, consider that Blizzard later released a game in March 2014 called Hearthstone: Heroes of Warcraft, which is a digital collectible card game with relatively low system requirements. Coincidentally, Hearthstone has resulted in 25 million new accounts as of January 2015 (Matulef 2015).

Lag usually results in low fps (frames per second), which determines how smoothly the game appears to work. 50–60 fps is optimal for SC2, but it was not uncommon to experience less than 10 fps when the game lagged. Lag often occurs in relation to increased output in the game—usually indicated by a lot of visual noise on the screen—and a memory leak is often an extreme example.
A specific example of graphics related lag at The Event occurred during a game of the map called *Operation A*, which requires that players set their shaders graphic setting to "high" in order to make the map’s lighting mimic a dark area where zombies would likely reside. However, David and Daniel’s computers could not process such settings effectively, which caused them to lag and restricted their ability to play *Operation A*. In other words, their computer hardware was insufficient to play the game to its full capacity, but only in so far as the creators of *SC2* and individual maps set the standards for what is sufficient. It should be noted, however, that lag is also a result of a poor Internet connection, which is largely beyond the control of both producers and consumers of online games—especially for young players who may rely on whatever service their parents provide for them.

Hardware slowdown and network latency will both result in a sluggish game of *SC2*. When a hardware slowdown results in a crashed game for an individual player, or more commonly, a player experiences network issues, the entire group experiences lag in the sense of literally pausing the game. A pop-up window opens on the screen that displays the name of the player who is experiencing issues, and other players can then vote on whether or not to kick the offending player from the game. Players sometimes become exasperated when the lag window opens:

George: Just leave ffs XD.

Frank: Laaaag

John: *sigh*

Paul: How is this even possible?
William: Is this the real life?

In one instance, Mark was kicked from the game while installing an update by Battle.net. He returned a couple of minutes later after the others had proceeded with the game, and asked John if they could restart. However, John informed him that they were already quite a bit into the game, and refused. *SC2* does not allow players to join a game in progress, which means that late comers are often left out due to John’s desire not to “re-host the first game in the first 5–10 minutes.” This limitation also explains why The Event usually begins 10–20 minutes after the scheduled start time—as John said, “too many are used to coming a bit late.”

Another limitation in *SC2* is maps that require a large download. If most of the group is able to download the map in several seconds, and another player takes several minutes, John may choose to wait on that one player—“annoying the entire group” or else abandon the lagging player. Although lag is not uncommon, it does matter who the offending player is. John suggests that if a newcomer lags frequently that it might be better if they do not attend The Event at all. In contrast, a regular, who usually does not lag, may just be experiencing “a bad Internet day” and would be forgiven for their transgression. Still, John would prefer not to remove any players from a game, and much less so The Event itself, unless absolutely necessary.

Although lag may appear trivial on the surface—it is a fairly common phenomenon for anyone who has played a game online—it is also a practical technological barrier to community participation. Full participation is literally impossible if you cannot play the game, and the fragmentation that results from members leaving
games due to lag issues does not benefit group cohesion. According to Matthew, many players from The Event were unable to switch to SC2 from WC3 because their computers were unable to handle the increased system requirements. Essentially, he felt that SC2 splintered the community, and resulted in XY becoming an archive.

**Technological Literacy and Guiding Others**

A major barrier for new players is the task of learning the game itself. The players who have been with the group since the beginning—through SC1 and WC3—were relatively young when they began to play video games, and the transition from SC1 and WC3 in particular made learning the ins and outs of SC2 much easier. The campaign mode in SC2 allows players to learn how to play the game alone, but it should be noted that the campaign playstyle is much different than the types of maps my participants were playing. Additionally, learning how to use the SC2 map editor was cited by participants as particularly challenging, and it was not a task that was undertaken by the majority of my participants.

Technological illiteracy is a barrier created largely by the imposition of complexity by Blizzard into its games and map editors. However, the solution is much more community based. The act of guiding others is a crucial method for creating group cohesion. Melinda Jacobs (2008) suggests that new players “[create] a better sense of identity and place within the world” (322) when they are taught by veteran players. More specifically, Bainbridge (2010) studied the role of game masters in Dungeons and Dragons and tutorial areas of MMORPGS, which both serve to teach “new players and [guide] more experienced players to achieve a satisfying play experience” (37). Guiding
others is essential for maintaining online gaming communities, because players will otherwise leave if they are unable to comprehend how to play the game or find connecting to the community too frustrating. For instance, I was fortunate enough to have an offline guide who introduced me to the group, showed me how to play the game and troubleshooting many of my technical issues. Likewise, other participants were quick to aid me in setting up Ventrilo so I could easily communicate with the entire group. When I played during The Event, and failed miserably, the group was gracious enough to offer guidance and clear directions. Additionally, I had a host of information available to me outside of the game through the XY forums, wikis, and YouTube videos where I could learn about strategies for playing the game and about the cultural milieu of the group, which facilitated my research. For example, in SC2 players are ranked based on skill into seven categories in ascending order: bronze, silver, gold, platinum, diamond, master and grand master. There are also unranked players who have not played enough ranked games during a particular season to be classified. Bronze League Heroes, as the name suggests, is a YouTube series that focuses on matches between players in the lowest ranked bronze league. The host, a player and caster named Husky, who also casts professional matches, narrates the matches with comedic effect. The videos are both humorous and informative. In order to understand the humor of the videos, viewers generally have to understand at least the basics of SC2, which leads to a sense of achievement for players who feel that they are “in on the joke” —much in the same way that players feel achieved by being able to guide others.
Even veterans received advice from other players. For instance, the group played a map called *Nebula Forces* made by a member named Donald. As he was present during the game, Donald gave James valuable advice on how to more effectively play the map: “Firepower and range, stay behind levi, don't play hero, play smart.” Of course, James proceeded to ignore Donald’s advice and played in exactly the opposite way, because “that didn’t fit [his] play style.” Still, McGonigal (2011) suggests that gamers experience vicarious pride when they provide advice about games they have already played, which may help improve group cohesion (87). Overall, reading about strategy, watching videos of other SC2 matches, and talking to players online are all useful methods for overcoming technological illiteracy when learning a new game—in lieu of simply making games easier.

**Accessing Maps and Finding Players**

Blizzard’s handling of arcade games has also impacted how players join the SC2 community. John described the section in the game where players look for arcade maps to play as a copy of the Apple store, which “forces a ‘popularity’ system.” In other words, players always see the most commonly played maps first when searching. Pearce (2011) describes feedback as “a phenomenon in which some portion of the output of a system is passed through the input . . . within networked social systems, feedback can be a powerful engine for large-scale social emergence, and the accelerated forms of emergence seen in these systems are a direct result of the designed affordances of the software” (45). For example, the more people play a map, the more people will see that map; the more people who see that map, the more people who will play that map. This
phenomenon means that maps which did not become popular early on receive very few views overall. John explained that he once waited eight hours for only three people to show up to play his map—a major disincentive for mapmakers. This deterrent is compounded by the existence of other outlets for those interested in creating—such as the Steam client, which offers games for low prices and is open to indie developers. As John described it, “if you are super skilled you might prefer to put the same time on [the] Unity game [engine] and try to sell on Steam vs putting that time on a 100% free sc2 map.”

However, a community like the one my participants belong to offers at least a partial solution to this problem. Most players who look for maps to play via the general search function have no way of knowing if anyone is actually playing the map, which may discourage many players from attempting to play at all. In contrast, when players know that they have a set group of participants to play with at a pre-determined time then actually playing the game becomes much easier. The tradeoff is that individuals do not have as much control over which maps they play each week. For mapmakers, though, defined groups provide a more-or-less guaranteed outlet for testing and improving maps on a consistent basis.

Professionalization of Hobbies

Matthew suggested that developers want their games to be played a certain way, which recalls Schüll’s (2013) work on inscription related to the ways creators of slot machines in Las Vegas meticulously plan to drive customer interactions with the gambling devices. SCI developed relatively untouched by Blizzard in terms of updates and patches, and is generally considered one of the most balanced RTS games ever made.
In contrast, Blizzard meddled heavily in WC3’s post-release development to the point that a single race, the night elves, became the dominant race in competitive play. The balance of SC1 is a huge factor in making the game a viable eSport, because competitive play relies on fairness and a variety of playstyles. In contrast, the “over balancing” by Blizzard in both WC3 and SC2 damaged the sustainability of both games as competitive spaces—necessarily changing the composition of the StarCraft community.

Matthew felt that SC2 became oriented more towards casual players, which upset the professional community. He argued that Blizzard had no role in originally making SC1 an eSport. Instead, it was the South Korean organization KeSPA and professional players who built the eSports empire. Not until the release of SC2 did Blizzard become involved in the competitive scene—mainly with the intention of preventing professional players from clinging to SC1 and competing financially with SC2. However, Blizzard was unable to stem the tide of change from competitive SC1 to MOBAs such as League of Legends (LoL) and an influx of players retiring from the competitive arena altogether.

On March 18, 2015 Blizzard created a post on Battle.net describing the upcoming beta of the third installment of SC2 called Legacy of the Void. Blizzard suggested that they have “been trying to be as open as possible with the status of [their] development, and strongly believe that the increased cooperation between developers and players is beneficial to StarCraft II” (Blizzard Entertainment 2015b). Whether or not video game companies are truly “open as possible” with consumers is debatable, but this statement shows that Blizzard is aware of its role in the larger gaming community—in which it wants to be seen positively. Ironically, part of Blizzard’s marketing process requires
balancing the needs of professional players and so-called casual players. In contrast to Matthew, who felt that Blizzard has increasingly focused on casual players, John suggested that perhaps one barrier to community building is still to come: a growing focus on professional melee play—“to the point of putting newbie . . . players more behind.”

For instance, the *Legacy of the Void* beta includes a change that boosts the starting number of workers (responsible for collecting resources) in a game from six to twelve, which serves to speed up the beginning of a match. Blizzard risks losing its main player base, represented by groups and individuals like my research participants, by focusing on professional gameplay, because professional maps “rely too much on quicker games, on smaller maps . . . which becomes stale much faster compared to *SCI,*” according to John. Therefore, casual players and those watching professional matches are at risk of becoming “bored” with SC2 when faced with a more homogenous offering of maps. Several XY members and Battle.net users felt that this phenomenon was becoming more common in gaming, to the determent of RTS games. Additionally, players have voiced concern that SC2 has been moving toward more “micro-intensive” gameplay, which “requires an extreme amount of mechanics to be adept at. The result is that more casual gamers have scared away from the game” (Blizzard Entertainment 2015). Ultimately, players disagreed on the direction of Blizzard’s future focus on gamer populations, but all were aware of the role of developers and producers in implementing technological innovation and restrictions in their games, and the effect that it has on the sustainability of their communities.
Although it is beyond the scope of this research to deeply describe how SC2 is practiced in South Korea, it is worth noting that professional play is experienced differently within the nation’s borders. Researching the politics of online gaming in South Korea, Dal Yon Jin and Florence Chee (2009) “found the prevalence of mainstream celebrity gaming culture helps to maintain popularity of games that would otherwise fade into an ‘old favorite,’ such as StarCraft” (29). If a turn to eSports in South Korea kept SC1 alive and well throughout the years, it seems plausible that Blizzard would be invested in the same strategy for SC2 across markets; although my North American and European participants, including one of the most competitive SC players in the group, Jeffrey, bemoaned this shift.
CHAPTER SIX: TRADITIONAL BOUNDARIES AND NATIONAL CULTURES

Many identifiers are used to mark group membership such as age, race, gender, and socioeconomic status. The meaning and scope of each of these indicators has been expanded with the emergence of the Internet. Perhaps the most ubiquitous and clearly defined form of community is that of the nation-state. That is, most persons in the world are given a label both at birth and throughout their lives that categorizes them based on nationality. However, Jacobs (2008) has argued that “there has been an increase in collisions of cultures via the global nature of the Internet, and . . . this new synthetic world, untainted by cultural norms, has become the breeding ground for a new, multiculturalistic society” (317). In other words, Jacobs suggests that the Internet has created a space in online gaming for players from different countries and cultures to share, and in the process, co-exist culturally. She also notes, however, in her research on the text-based massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) *Omerta*, that players of the game refused to play with Turkish participants due to perceptions of Turkish real world culture—a type of discrimination Jacobs terms *culturism*.

Other scholars, such as Larissa Hjorth and Dean Chan (2009) have argued that “through the lens of gaming cultures we can gain insight into emerging transnational communities as well as helping redefine nation-state boundaries and enclave alliances” (2). Focusing on the Asia-Pacific, Hjorth and Chan have noted the difference in gameplay
between various national cultures; for example, that that handheld devices Nintendo DS and PSP are particularly popular in Japan whereas MMOGs are entrenched in South Korean culture. What each of these scholars have discussed, and what I explore further here, is the role of the national cultures and cultural identity in creating online gaming communities. Below I describe several ways that geographical, political, and cultural boundaries inform community identity, starting with a discussion of the World Championship Series (WCS) of SC2, which is a global event highlighting how community is both diverse and geographically restricted. Next, I explore how my research participants made sense of national, geographic, and cultural differences within the context of the weekly Event and how they navigate the issues that arise when technological barriers intersect with geographical barriers. Finally, I will show, graphically, how participants navigated the permeability of online gaming, beyond traditional borders such as nationality, by switching between various game spaces.

**World Championship Series**

One technological change that occurred during my research was the way in which players access SC2 on their computers. For example, I own *World of Warcraft, Diablo III, StarCraft II* and *Hearthstone*, which are all produced by Blizzard. Previously, if I wanted to play any of these games I would have to open them from the particular location where they were saved on my computer. Now when I want to play SC2 I instead launch Battle.net, which is a program that allows players to access all of their Blizzard games in one place. The relevance of this change is that players now see news related to *all* Blizzard games when they launch Battle.net, even if they are not actively playing a
particular game. For example, if I were to launch an instance of *Diablo III*, I would see advertisements directing me to where to watch the *SC2* World Championship Series (WCS) or how to attend Blizzard's semi-annual convention BlizzCon. The shift to a centrally located Battle.net also emphasized the relevance of nationality by placing the region selector, which is based on geographic location and tied loosely to nationality and language, up-front. Before, players would manually select which region's servers they wanted to play on within individual games. Finally, the switch to a single Battle.net program underscored the importance of brand and community cohesion by condensing Blizzard games into one visual space, and visibility of the WCS by advertising the event across games that otherwise have nothing to do with *SC2*.

The WCS is perhaps the best example of how nationality, technology, and community all intersect. In 2014 the WCS occurred over three seasons primarily in the United States, Europe, and South Korea, and was broadcasted in local time. According to Blizzard, “The WCS Leagues featured a total of $1.6 million prize pool in 2014 . . . Players compete all year in WCS Leagues and Global Events, and their performance is tracked in the WCS Standings. The top 16 players at the end of the year compete in the Global Finals for top cash prizes and the title of World Champion” (Blizzard Entertainment 2014). The WCS has “global events,” which are essentially competitions that occur throughout the world that allow players to gain points during the season that impact their competitive standing. In 2014 these events were held in places such as: Sao Paulo, Brazil; Helsinki, Finland; Cologne, Germany; Katowice, Poland; Copenhagen,
Denmark; Seoul, Korea; Bucharest, Romania; Taipei, Taiwan; and Dallas, Texas in the United States.

In 2014, players were allowed to only play in one region per season. The American server included players from The United States, Canada, and Latin America. The Chinese server hosted Chinese players while the Southeast Asian server was used by players in Southeast Asia and Oceania. Korea and Taiwan supported a shared server, which included players from South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau. Each of these servers was considered a part of the WCS: America event. WCS: Europe had its own European server for players in Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. Regional matches for the WCS occurred online, but the “Final 32” took place in Burbank, California and Cologne, Germany. The finale had its own site at Blizzcon—a semi-annual Blizzard themed convention held in Anaheim, California.

The WCS was restructured for the 2015 season, and merged the American, European and smaller regions into one “Premier League” while creating a new league in Korea for a total of two Korean leagues. Blizzard requires that all competitors in the Premiere League show proof of residency, which is generally done by submitting a valid government issued ID. Players, residing outside of a particular region who want to represent that specific area, must have a professional athlete visa, work visa, or student visa. Players are eligible to compete in both Korean leagues at once. A new addition also allows non-Korean players to compete in the Korean leagues. According to Blizzard, this change was created, because “as the acknowledged leader in eSports infrastructure and

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21 Blizzard Entertainment, Inc. is headquartered in Irvine, California.
legacy, Korea is the home of the best StarCraft II players in the world and is undoubtedly the most competitive region.” This description of the WCS exemplifies how SC2 is a highly global game, and regional and national borders are clearly demarcated for the purposes of rules and regulations. National cultures are further highlighted by the perceived skill level of players, with South Korea overwhelmingly coming out on top.

WCS: A Case Study

Although I watched much of the 2014 WCS I will briefly describe one event in more detail in order to show the prevalence, and complexity, of national identity in the professional SC community. During the summer of 2014 I observed the first day of the “Homestory Cup IX Powered by XMG,” which was held in Germany. The viewers at home, watching online, saw both live video of commentators in a lounge and video of the matches. The match video also included smaller video screens that showed live video footage of the actual players as well as small advertisements around the screen. In the web browser available to the viewer was a chat room where viewers talked to each other and left feedback for the commentators. In the lounge there were three commentators sitting on a couch. One was English, one American, and the other German. The three commentators alternated between commenting on the current match and joking about non-game related topics. Since this particular match was being held in Germany the German observer was asked to make a few comments in German for the German viewers. At one point, two South Koreans entered the lounge. Although each person spoke a native language such as German or Korean, they also spoke English. As this scene
unfolded viewers chatted amongst themselves about *Mario Kart 8*, a game that was released at around the time of this event.

As previously stated, Jin and Chee (2009) showed that popularity begets popularity in gaming culture. On a basic level, "The Homestory Cup" serves to support the status of *SC2* on both a local and global level—for Germans, Brits, Koreans, and Americans locally and together globally. Individuals from those countries relate to the commentators who share their national background while having the opportunity to interact with individuals from other nations. This event exemplifies how online gaming communities can be both national and transnational, both virtual and physical.

Blizzard further promotes the concept of global cohesion through the language it uses to depict the WCS. For example, when describing the change in rules for the 2015 WCS the company wrote on Battle.net:

> In collaboration with our partners and key figures in the *eSports community*, we’ve come up with changes that we hope will improve the WCS experience and continue fostering a vibrant *StarCraft II* *eSports ecosystem*. . . . By bringing together 32 players from multiple regions and introducing on-site competition for the round of 32, the unified Premier League takes on a more *global* feel and the level of competition will intensify for players and viewers alike. [Blizzard Entertainment 2015a, emphasis added]

The use of “community,” “ecosystem,” and “global” makes it apparent that Blizzard would like to present professional *SC2* as a simultaneously tight knit (community), expansive (global) and cohesive (ecosystem) environment. In other words, professional
SC2 is promoted as a game for everyone, everywhere, that can be enjoyed with anyone, anywhere.

**Nationality: Beyond Esports**

Talking about the circumstances of a player’s offline identity was not common practice during my participant observation, but I did discover this type of information as a by-product of talking casually to players outside of the game and during interviews. Overall, players did not place a large emphasis on say, where other players reside or their cultural identities, especially when it came to making decisions about who should be included or excluded in the group. Jose gave the example of Blizzard's *WoW*, another popular game amongst SC2 players, which might find players from Taiwan, Lithuania, The United States, and China playing together. Jose suggested that these national and cultural differences were not apparent unless players explicitly stated them. Matthew echoed these thoughts, and said that nationality does not matter much beyond practical issues such as time zone differences. In this sense, it appears that transnationalism, in terms of actually putting national identity to the side for specific purposes, truly *is* taking hold of online gaming. This transnationalism is a step further than Jacobs’ (2008) multiculturalism, which she argues is the phenomenon of multiple cultures coexisting, with the implication that those cultures are experienced out in the open. However, Jeffrey alluded to the importance of national borders when discussing gaming companies. He offered that most Western publishers do not have their own developers, and must rely on Korean developers to resolve technical issues. Additionally, my participants were not ignorant of cultural, national, and geographic differences between themselves and other
players. Next, I briefly outline several examples that show players online still care about traditional definitions of belonging such as national identity.

The "leader" of my research group is French-Canadian, but in his own words, styles himself as an authentic “French man.” Following his lead, group members often made references to his national identity in jest. It was also not uncommon to hear participants talk about other cultures. For example, one night I witnessed the following exchange:

Frank: OK mais arrete aven ces liens de merde! Cmon man.
Scott: George es muy loco y muy estupido :D

[George tries to say something in Japanese and Frank says he knows Japanese]:

Watachi wa Frank desu.

The final comment was followed by a short discussion on anime by four participants, which showed an additional interest in other cultures beyond language. This discussion, while playful, displays at least a basic awareness by participants of global distance. On the one hand, they are not living in a nebulous bubble of identity that ignores the outside world. National identity is still alive and well for them. On the other hand, they easily move from one national and cultural reference point to another. Ultimately, it is impossible to assess how much this fluidity reflects the gaming environment and how much it is indicative of the general increase in cultural diversity in most countries.

*Self-Selecting Communities: Daylight Saving Time and Time Zones*
In 2014 daylight saving time ended on November 2nd. The following Saturday, an hour before The Event began, the following conversation occurred in the XY chatroom:

Michael: Does anyone know if John is coming today?
Eric: Odds are. It’s still 9.
George: Oh, of course he is.
David: He’s usually a bit late since he waits for people to come
James: John is always here. ALWAYS.
Michael: Just wondering since he normally seems here by now
James: Also, it’s only 8. Unless you happen to live somewhere where daylight savings doesn’t take effect
Michael: Ah, maybe my area doesn’t have daylight savings
James: Oh, I didn’t even notice the timer is set to 8:00 PM
David: On my end it’s 8:00 PM already

The Event’s information page includes a schedule that displays the date and time for the gathering. As John is the leader of The Event he is the one normally in charge of setting the time, and Battle.net automatically updates the time displayed to players based on their relative time zones. However, in this case, various players resided in areas that do not observe daylight saving time. Therefore, they exhibited confusion upon showing up for The Event’s “regular” time—only to find out that it had been pushed an hour back. In this case, national borders intersected with technology to disrupt the community: most members left for an hour to play games elsewhere while they waited for The Event to
start, instead of sticking around to talk to one another or play short matches between themselves before The Event officially began.

The main countries represented by my group are the United States, Canada, and England. However, William noted that it “ended up being hardest on the Brits, though. I think they were usually passing out by the time most of us were just getting started.” The time zone difference also affected William when he wanted to participate in a tournament before Blizzard allowed players to freely switch servers. Many Europeans were competitive in the arcade map *Star Battle*, and William was required to buy a second copy of the game in order to play against them. In addition, because there were so many Europeans in the tournament their schedules were accommodated over others’. For William, the tournament began early in the morning, and ultimately, his team was competatively annihilated. Based on the time zone issue, William argued that “you can certainly make the case that the internet results in self-selecting communities that only present the facade of universality.” In other words, players online tend to play when it is most convenient for them, which results in communities being formed around localities that share a similar schedule.

“*We’re Going to Europe!*”: Regions and Servers

Early on in my research Battle.net experienced a major bug, which resulted in broken maps that had been updated recently on the North American server. The group speculated that the bug was due to the new *WoW* expansion. That is, another Blizzard game directly affected *SC2*. Since many maps were not working on the North American server the group decided to transfer over to the European server:
Donald: Do we have an EU group? . . . John, I will make a XY group on EU and transfer it to you.

John: You should have let me make the group. ;p Seriously . . .

Donald: And it’s a back up one pretty much incase Blizzard fucks up some more on N.A.

John: Ah, fine. ;p

William: So yeah, to those who weren’t here at start of event . . . next week get the patch for Europe . . . So that if we need to we can play on Europe . . . if the bugs with uploading persist

The process of switching servers is not exactly straight forward or common knowledge to those who have never done it before, but those in the know easily guided others to make the switch. One member, Mark, did not appear in the new XY group on the European server. Since no one had a way to contact him outside of the XY chat, William volunteered to return to the U.S. server to retrieve him. Apparently, Mark was not watching the XY chat and therefore did not realize that everyone had left. Some players worried about how good their Internet connection would be with the EU server since they are located far away, mainly in the U.S. Donald, a European, explained that the European servers are empty at this time of day, around 5:00 a.m. in Europe, and should have maximum capacity for the group to play. I watched James follow the process of switching servers, which included accepting a new terms of service that he did not read. He also had the opportunity to create a new character name, but chose to keep his current
one. Next, he had to re-join the new $XY$ group made by Donald, because it was technically different than the existing one. He also had to re-add everyone to his friend’s list. Each player has a different Character Code on the EU server than they do on the U.S. server so it is not merely a matter of clicking on the other players name or searching. Instead, players must locate their Character Code and share it with others in the group. Switching between servers is now easier than it previously was. William says that he used to pay additional money to play on the European server while Donald did the same to access the American server. However, Blizzard eventually made it free to cross between all four servers.

The American server was broken for several weeks, but John insisted that the group would not travel to the European server until 9:20 p.m. EST at the earliest in order to make sure no late comers were left behind—despite other players asking him to make the switch. In the mean time, one player suggested that the group could play maps on the U.S. server if they mass update them with patches, but John argued that would require more work than switching servers. Finally, a player asked if the group could play a quick map before they “begin the real event,” but John told him to “Wait for 9:10 pm, my eternal traditional.” This exchange represents several recurring patterns. First, John is clearly in charge, and ultimately, he makes decisions for the group. In this case, as he does when making map selections, he made a point of emphasizing group cohesion over fragmentary play. Additionally, the issues with the $SC2$ servers show how the technology we use to connect can also directly inhibit the process of community building.
The role of nationality, as a traditional marker of group belonging, is complicated in relation to community building online. Offline, national cultures are often bound to physical space. However, virtual land is limitless and both created by and experienced in the mind. This imagined land can manifest as literal images that replicate the already existing concept of physical land in the real world, such as trees in Second Life, or it can be more broadly conceived as any space where a person is able to interact with or manipulate their surrounding, virtual environment. Chat rooms, personal websites, and profiles on social networking sites, for example, all allow people to make some sort of personal claim to existence in a virtual reality. This unique perception of land and space changes what it means to belong to a national community. No longer is society merely the people living down the street or even in the same country. It now literally extends to all the people sitting behind the computer screens, potentially scattered across the entire world. Additionally, it can blur these real world identities and expand society to other species and even other locations not existing in the real world.

All of this is to say that online gaming communities have ample opportunity to become transnational. However, I found that national identity continued to be used by my participants for community building for practical reasons such as entering tournaments and syncing schedules. At the same time, nationality, and other traditional markers of group membership such as age, race, gender, socioeconomic background, and so on were far less important for how players treated each other and who they included or excluded from the group on a cultural basis.

**Breaking Boundaries: Permeability Between Game Spaces**
According to Boellstorff (2008), “much research on virtual worlds is predicated on a cultural assumption that if a boundary is transgressed it is thereby blurred or weakened. However, a large body of anthropological work—on topics from gender to ethnicity to nationalism—demonstrates that crossing a boundary can strengthen the distinctiveness of the two domains it demarcates” (23). As previously noted, players online often transgress national boundaries by interacting across vast geographical distances. However, this virtual movement does not necessarily weaken traditional national borders, but instead, occasionally serves to emphasize them. Furthermore, during my research, the permeability of online gaming communities existed on a more micro level than national boundaries. Specifically, my participants flowed in and out of the SC2 game space to and from other game spaces.
Fig. 6 shows on a small-scale Shirky’s (2008) concept of a small-world network in which small, densely connected nodes are more loosely connected to other small, densely connected nodes (215). In this map we can see the various ways in which some members have branched out from the core group to play other games and how membership in each of these nodes overlaps. Every player listed in the map participated in the group during the Warcraft III (WC3) era. However, players dispersed, for various reasons already discussed, to other games as WC3 waned in popularity. Today, only a
few founding members present during the WC3 period still play SC2 with the group during The Event. However, those who no longer play SC2 remain connected, both directly and indirectly, to those who do through the games they play.

Participation is not equal for all group members, because actual game play varies by person. However, Christopher explained that group members often discuss games, and other topics of interest, even if they do not actively play together. He reiterated the importance of AIM and Ventrilo as spaces where these conversations occur. For instance, Steam represents a conglomeration of many different games, and group members frequently shift from one game to another, splintering and rejoining small clusters of players as needed. More significantly, the Steam groups in Fig. 6 are dedicated less to regularly playing games together and more to congregating on Ventrilo to converse with one another.

As Fig. 6 indicates, the majority of XY members who originally played WC3 no longer play SC2, and therefore, this map does not represent the relationships between players who attended The Event during the bulk of my research. Consequently, the graph more accurately depicts the ways in which players connected to non-game spaces, such as the XY forums, remain in contact by partaking in a variety games and using third party communications software. Probably, although not conclusively, this observation may indicate that participants who originated from XY require these alternative spaces, because XY is only marginally active today. Additionally, XY is dedicated to creating custom content for multiple games, but is not a game itself. As a result, it is unsurprising that long-time members of the site, who failed to make the move to SC2, would scatter to
and rely on these new game spaces. If anything, this pattern shows the strength of the social bonds between XY members. In contrast, current participants of The Event are more oriented around SC2, specifically, and thus, may have less of a need to connect through other means.

*Fig. 6* shows the fallacy of viewing group membership as non-porous or ignoring how members of a particular group may be interacting with each other outside of a core group, thus changing the dynamics of the core group itself. Although groups may be discrete, membership and activity is overlapping as the different groups blink in and out of operational existence. Having established that gaming groups do not exist exclusively in discrete arenas of play, I next explore one example of what it means to move between games.

**League of Legends**

During the group’s early years an extremely popular map was created for WC3, which was the game played during The Event at the time. *Defense of the Ancients*, more commonly referred to as *DotA*, has been described as “likely the most popular and most-discussed free, non-supported game mod in the world, judging by the numbers” (Walbridge 2008). When SC2 was released there was speculation, and according to at least one of my participants: hope on the part of SC2’s creator Blizzard, that a new *DotA* map would be created for the game—thus, increasing the popularity of SC2. Instead, Valve Corporation, the creators of the software distribution platform Steam, acquired the intellectual rights to *DotA* and released a standalone game, *DotA 2*, in 2013 (Hernandez 2013). To date, “Dota 2 has become the most actively played game on Steam, with daily
peaks of over 800,000 concurrent players” (Hing 2014). Additionally, in 2009 the development studio Riot Games released *League of Legends (LoL)*, a multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) game, that was inspired by *DotA*. Since then, *LoL* has usurped *SC2* in popularity—by a large margin. According to John Gaudiosi, by 2012 *LoL* became “officially the most played [by total number of hours played] PC game in North America and Europe.” Like *SC*, *LoL* has a large competitive community, and “the 2014 tournament had the fifth largest prize pool in eSports history, sitting at 2.3 million dollars” (E-sports Earnings 2014). In terms of players leaving *SC2*, especially those who played custom arcade maps in *WC3* and competitively in *SCI*, the rise of *LoL* represents perhaps the largest exodus of gamers from the *StarCraft* franchise. More specifically, it is the most popular game among members who have left my *SC2* research group, and is thus where I turn my attention now.

One night during my research I noted that Matthew, Jesse, and Andrew were talking about a game called *League of Legends*. I gathered that the season was coming to an end, which is analogous to the *SC2 WCS*, and they were discussing whether or not they would be able to attain platinum league before the season’s end. Essentially, they were concerned about how many matches they would need to play and win in order to reach a higher level in the standings. After finishing a *SC2* map at around 1:00 a.m. EST James announced that he would be “jumping” to *LoL*, because The Event was wrapping up. I decided to follow James to this new game space in order to better understand the porosity of the *SC2* group. The jump was not quick—James had to wait for an update to finish
installing and for his friends to finish their current game before he could join them, which immediately suggested that porosity is at least somewhat limited. However, I was ultimately able to make several observations about the similarities and differences between these two game spaces.

*LoL* is a MOBA game, and *SC2* is a RTS game, which makes comparing the two difficult. However, both games do share some similarities in terms of overall “feel” when it comes to controls, which means that anyone familiar with either game will not find the other completely foreign. Still, *LoL* is a more team-based game than *SC2*, and is generally seen as more “casual”—although not necessarily compared to other games. *LoL* is a newer game, and is also free, unlike *SC2*, which has contributed to the rise of *LoL*’s popularity compared to *SC2*’s relative decline. In fact, it is not uncommon to find players who began playing *SC1* or *SC2* now playing *LoL*—whether simultaneously or exclusively. It should be noted that the differences between the two games as presented here, which are based on my own observations of and experiences in each game, are contested by gamers themselves. For every player who feels that *SC2* is harder, for example, is one who would say the same about *LoL*.

Jumping from *SC2* to *LoL* created a minor technological inconvenience in terms of bringing the group together. James was on three Ventrilo channels when he entered the game, which he found confusing. Therefore, Andrew and everyone else playing *LoL* moved over to one, common channel. In-game, *LoL* had similar technological issues, such as lag and crashing, that players experienced in *SC2*. 
Ironically, *SC2* actually creates problems for those players switching to play *LoL* after a long session of *SC2*: their hands become tired from adjusting to a new keyboard and mouse setup.

Just as the *SC2* matches are uploaded to YouTube by John, the *LoL* matches I watched were, in some cases, streamed by Andrew. Creating games in *LoL* is slightly different than *SC2*, though. Andrew usually invites players, but there are often fewer players involved. Therefore, he does not have to worry about having to “sacrifice” players in the same way John does during *SC2* games. Players also do not pick maps in the same way as they are chosen in *SC2*, but instead decide on various game modes. There are, however, a lot of characters to play as. Those who have played longer and more often have more of the characters unlocked. In contrast to The Event, where John speaks the most in Ventrilo, Andrew is the main person talking during the *LoL* games. Additionally, players rarely talk about non-game related topics. A large portion of the conversation is dedicated to what is occurring either real-time in the game or other game-related issues.

Switching between two games, such as *SC2* and *LoL* is illustrative of several generalities and specifics in community building around online games. First, these communities are permeable and generally not explicitly exclusionary. That is, James’ *SC2* friends seemed happy to have him join them in *LoL*, and players active in both games regularly spoke to one another via Ventrilo and instant messenger. Second, both communities, those playing *SC2* or *LoL*, had a leader of some sort. In *SC2*, John was responsible for hosting The Event and choosing maps to be played. In *LoL*, Andrew was
perhaps the most well-known player amongst the group and responsible for inviting other players and setting up matches. Third, players utilized third party software, such as YouTube for the SC2 matches and Twitch, an online streaming service that is popular with gamers, for the LoL games. The use of these services allowed players to advertise the community and themselves, provide entertainment and guidance for other players, and stay connected to fellow community members playing different games.

Despite these similarities, there were two main differences between the communities. First, my SC2 participants were part of a group that stemmed from a forum, XY, and a gaming company, Blizzard. In contrast, those I observed playing LoL were a patchwork of players who came from other games, such as SC2 specifically for LoL. The second difference is that my SC2 participants attended a weekly Event, whereas the LoL players I observed played throughout the week with no set schedule. The similarities and differences between SC2 and LoL suggest that online gaming communities can be compared in terms of leadership structure, inclusiveness, scope, involvement of members, and so on. My analysis also cautions, however, that online gaming communities should be understood within the context of the specific games, websites, companies, etc. they exist around.
CHAPTER EIGHT: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Discussion

At this point, it is useful to return to my research questions. These findings show that online gaming communities are both inclusionary and exclusionary, homogenous and diverse, but ultimately constrained by the limitations of modern technology. Additionally, the shape that community building takes is dependent on the type of games central to the community, in this case RTS games, and the goals of players, such as building custom content or playing professionally. Finally, the history of individual online gaming groups is important, because people and technology change over time. As they evolve so does the relationship between the two, which practically shifts group identity.

1. Who is included or excluded in online gaming communities, and to what extent are traditional markers such as nationality, involved?

Players must have access to a computer with hardware that is capable of handling the demands of the game. They must also possess enough technological literacy to understand how to access the game and various forms of technical communication used by other participants. Finally, players must be cognizant of the cultural milieu of the group, which involves being able to communicate in the dominant language used by the group as well as maintaining stable social bonds. For example, in my research group, every player spoke English and avoided confrontational offline topics in chat. Each of
these inclusionary, and implied exclusionary, criteria will outright allow or prevent an individual from gaining complete membership.

In contrast, the role of nationality, a traditional marker of community belonging, is less direct. Players in my research group were not explicitly excluded based on national identity, but recall that other researchers have found evidence of such exclusion (Jacobs 2008). In the case of my group, geographical distance created practical barriers such as lag and time zone differences, which led to self-selecting communities. However, gaming research has generally shown a range of examples that illustrate both inclusion and exclusion, based on both technical and cultural factors, in online gaming (Chung 2009).

Finally, exploring the role of geographic borders and national cultures in community building online raises the question of what it means that people are regularly moving around in both cyberspace and physical space. Having an up-to-date computer, understanding English, and adapting to Western culture are all markers of wealth and national belonging. How do we rectify these demands with the decrease in borders that cyberspace offers in the modern age? Will people ever be able to truly move freely online as long as these barriers exist? Or will online video games always require separate region servers and result in self-selecting communities based on geographic location or national culture?

2. Why do people join, stay, or leave online gaming communities?

The normal progression for online gaming communities tends to be predicated on the flow of new game releases—with players moving on to new games as old games become outdated and stale in comparison. This has been the case with SC2 for quite a
few. Therefore, maintaining a group like the one my participants are in is relatively unusual. So why do players stay? For content creators, a major impetus for not leaving the SC2 community is the amount of effort put forth to learn how to adequately use the game’s editor. According to John, “it would just be a pain to leave for something else.”

Participants in this specific group also gave weight to the importance of social bonds. For example, according to Matthew, core members of a group can influence the likeliness of group cohesion. In this case, Jeffrey was the most competitive player amongst the group, and many of the games became about “beating Jeffrey.” In the same sense, John is a central figure for the group as host of The Event. For his part, John suggested that hosting The Event every single week came down, in part, to habit. Ultimately, I argue that RTS games in particular are less likely to draw in participants with the explicit goal of “building community”—mainly due to the difficulty of such games and the more direct focus on the game itself—compared to inherently more socially driven games.

3. How are online gaming communities formed, maintained, or dissolved?

In the case of my research sample, the community exists because SC1, WC3, and SC2 exist. However, more specifically, it was born from a non-game space, the XY website, which is dedicated to custom content. Despite the sharp decline of XY’s active population, the group continued to exist through The Event, a weekly night devoted to playing arcade maps. Both the forum, and custom content more broadly, are examples of projects that players bond together over in a collaborative manner. Other, non-game, spaces such as YouTube have helped maintain the group’s numbers by drawing in new members. Additionally, although many players frequent The Event less due to interests
in others games, several participants are still connected by the other games they have left for, such as *LoL* and *WoW*. Ultimately, should the community cease to exist entirely, its demise will be linked closely to the failings of Blizzard and the technical shortcomings of the game itself.

4. *What is the relationship between technology and community building?*

Technological barriers were the most obvious roadblock to community building. Limitations include a crude editor and lack of support for the custom creation community, underperforming software, latency in games, the snowball effect of choosing maps based on popularity, and so on. Technological barriers are important to consider, because they are issues that can be either “broken or fixed” and, theoretically at least, more easily addressed than more nebulous concerns such as group dynamics or cultural differences.

Overall, this research has shown that online communities are actual, even if also imagined, communities. However, they are different from offline communities in that they specifically rely on certain modern technologies. Online gaming communities are similar to other offline communities centered around common interests, but perhaps are more extensive in their global reach and speed at which their social networks flow. Additionally, play itself, which is sometimes one-in-the-same as work, acts as the most significant role in community building for online gaming communities, in contrast to other types of both online and offline communities.

Although new technology allows for new forms of community, it is not always the most efficient. The Internet, instant messaging services, and voice chat software show
this phenomenon. For example, my participants continue to use such out-dated technology as AIM, because AIM is simple and more convenient than modern instant messaging services. Additionally, because they have used AIM for so many years, my participants felt it would be a chore to move all of their contact information over to a new system. Ultimately, the swell of new forms of communications technology, such as various social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, adds to both the breadth of online communities and the difficulty of managing those communities. How can we administer the increasing size of social networks with new technology that may be more cumbersome than previous technology or short lived and constantly competing with other websites or software?

Conclusion

Application of Research and Opportunities for Future Research

Existing research on virtual worlds largely agrees that, for people partaking in virtual worlds, the online relationships they form are real, purposive, and often intense. (Boellstorff 2010; Brown 2011; Gottschalk 2010; Merkle and Richardson 2000). My research helps build on this literature to show how relationships exist within particular kinds of virtual worlds. That is, the literature shows that communities exist online in virtual worlds, but less has been said about online gaming communities, particularly of the RTS genre. Although work on virtual, non-gaming, worlds is important I suggest that games present a unique opportunity for understanding community formation. The application of this research is also more relevant to RTS game developers who face
different challenges than those creating other kinds of virtual worlds, and anthropologists who want to study virtual worlds that are not obviously designed as social.

Future online game studies on SC2 or related games would benefit by focusing more on the Asia-Pacific, as one example, because much of current marketing research is being done by Americans based on what Americans would like in gaming (Hjorth and Chan 2009:4). Although SC2 is most popular in the United States and South Korea, game studies would profit from looking at online gaming communities in the context of any geographical location—primarily because globalization is happening between other countries, whether or not you want to call them core or periphery (Wallerstein 1976) and there are simultaneously changes within countries. For example, in the Asia-Pacific, South Korean made games, such as Lineage, have been popular in countries like “China, Taiwan, Vietnam, and Thailand” (Hjorth and Chan 2009:6).

Bainbridge (2010) outlines several ways virtual worlds can be used to further offline research such as studying the pattern of epidemics and efficacy of laws and regulations by applying virtual versions to online games, treating online games as educational zones where players can absorb and learn about cultural diversity, and by extrapolating information about offline violence from occurrences of violence in-game (83–89). As laudable as these goals are, the purpose of this research has also been to improve online RTS video games for their own sake. That is, it is my hope that this research, and future research like it, will be used to improve RTS games by helping game producers and developers understand the technical and social needs of their consumers.
For example, future research might look at how work and play are related, and how developers and publishers can support gamers who include work as part of their play. For instance, the digital game store Steam attempted to introduce "paid mods" for games they distributed, such as Bethesda Softworks's *Skyrim*, in 2015. This system would essentially have allowed custom content creators to charge other players for use of their work, and game developers and publishers would have determined what percentage of the profits would go to the modders. This plan was met with massive push-back from both modders and regular players who felt that modders should either be offered a higher percentage of revenue from their mods or not allowed to charge at all. However, developers could increase support for content creators in other ways, such as by improving the editors used for their games, and thus, making the creation of custom content easier.

The importance of social connections remains entrenched in the social consciousness of RTS gamers. Indeed, the minor resurgence towards community participation I experienced at the end of my research period suggests that community building is an ongoing process that ebbs and flows, and that ultimately, players do have an interest in sustaining their communities. Therefore, the final question of this thesis is to ask how gamers can successfully build and sustain healthy communities as more people move online. Technological and cultural barriers to participation will vary from game to game, but this research has shown that players can find both cultural and technical solutions, which will in turn shape the format of the community. It is then the role of future anthropologists to uncover how gamers are adapting and how their efforts
can be combined with the work of producers of games to create sustainable online gaming communities.
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BIOGRAPHY

Kelly L. Flyte grew up in Illinois. She attended Loyola University Chicago, where she received her Bachelor of Science in Anthropology with minors in Sociology and Urban Studies in 2012. She began PC gaming with *Mixed-Up Mother Goose* in 1991, and has been an avid gamer ever since her parents bought her a Sega Genesis for Christmas in 1993. Since then her research has focused on the application of anthropology to cyberspace with projects centered around avatar culture and virtual relationships in social virtual worlds, the practice of Unitarian Universalism in *Second Life*, the relationship between Internet use and human trafficking globally, the history of modern video game technology such as the Oculus Rift and Ouya, and most recently, community building around online games like the *StarCraft* and *Warcraft* franchises. As an anthropology graduate student at George Mason she served as a teaching assistant for two years, and she will be a graduate lecturer in the SOAN department at the university beginning in Fall 2015.