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GAMERS AS POSTMODERN SUBCULTURE

INTRODUCTION

This ethnographic study aims at describing the subculture of computer gaming through the observation of participants of an electronic sport tournament.

The electronic sport, sometimes called cybersport or e-sport for short, is the competitive play of digital games. Online tournaments are currently the most common; however, large live tournaments, where gamers participate by physically attending the event, naturally draw the most attention. Players compete in various games before the eyes of hundreds or thousands of viewers while professional commentators discuss the matches.

The electronic sport phenomenon is on the rise in the Czech Republic, as well as in Europe in general, yet it cannot be described as attracting large masses. Therefore, I have decided to conduct a research during two electronic sport tournament events – ASUS FINALS 4 and 5 – which took place in Brno, Czech Republic in December 2012 and June 2013, respectively. The participants were men primarily ages 12-30.

THEORY

The main theoretical framework for this study is the concept of post-subculturalism and postmodern authenticity by British sociologist David Muggleton. Muggleton reacts to Dick Hebdige and his influential study, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, by claiming that subcultures are no longer coherent class- and generation-based groups that can be described through a few simple characteristics.

Therefore, Muggleton argues not only against Hebdige's starting points, but also against the starting points of the whole Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham. Hebdige tried to unearth from cultural and social events a more deeper and "real" essence, namely class-related currents of power, which is according to Muggleton unnecessary, worthless, and obscuring the true essence of subcultures; Muggleton claims that subcultures are currently apolitical, a situation that was impossible in Britain of the seventies and eighties. The critic further explains that subcultures are in a state of flux and that they adopt characteristics typical of postmodernity rather than modernity. In addition, he defines several basic features that are typical of postmodern subcultures: movement away from class consciousness, depoliticization, blurring of subculture boundaries, individualization, and aestheticization and conscious deauthentication of experiences. Paradoxically, due to these features the members of a particular subculture do not have to consider themselves to be a part of the subculture and if they do, then only in an embarrassed, self-deprecating manner.

METHODOLOGY

I have chosen for this study the method of participant observation, during which the observer enters the group of the observed individuals and in effect becomes one of them. This method of research is used mostly in qualitative and non-standardized research because it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to repeat the research under the same conditions.

Several areas of inquiry are defined that are answered during the participant observation method: Who is on the stage, what is happening, what is the context of the scene and why does the group behave the way it does?

By using the participant observation method, I will try to answer the following research questions: **Can gamers be described as a postmodern subculture? Which criteria listed by David Muggleton are reflected in the gaming subculture?**

THE COMMERCIALIZATION OF THE EVENT

Upon entering the premises of the event the audience had to pass around several stands and displays with presentations of various commercial sponsors. The audience saw the commercial sponsors and commercial background of the event as completely normal; therefore, unlike Hebdige subcultures, in which the true core rejects commercialization, advertising and commercialization is seen as an integral part of the whole subculture and its core.

AMATEURISM OR IMMEDIACY

One characteristic typical of gaming subculture is the notion of immediacy. Although the event was paid and had professional facilities, equipment, and presentation, it is still attended by a relatively narrow range of interconnected people who are associated through informal rather than formal ties.

Gaming scene and its participants are interconnected with more links than other comparable scenes and therefore could be described as a community. Importantly, the immediacy in interpersonal contact is causally connected to amateurism that underlined the whole event (although the attendees were relatively forgiving).

An interesting aspect that further confirms the immediacy aspect was the presence of gamers in the audience itself. The gamers could stay in the backstage, but a portion of them moved freely among the audience, often greeting members of the audience and stopping by for a casual conversation, which further enhanced the community feeling of the event.

PRESSURE ON THE GAMERS AND THE INTERCONNECTEDNESS OF AUDIENCE AND GAMERS SPHERES

Unlike players, audience, when viewing certain games, is "omniscient." Audience is then in a much stronger position than the audience of regular sport, often loudly cheering the players, thus forcing them not only to be successful, but also to play the best they can.

The behavior described above could be seen during the tournament. The player Rikytan dominated the game in a way that the audience 15 minutes into the match knew he simply had to win. However, he was rather passive for 40 minutes of the match, practically stalling out the game. The audience tried to encourage the passive players into a more active play. Nevertheless, the audience's efforts to hasten the pace of the match did not work and the game lasted more than one hour. Rikytan was unable to handle the audience reaction and suffered a mental

breakdown after the match. One of the organizers commented: “Rikytan is sitting for four hours feeling completely down, nobody had to tell him anything (about his performance). He himself doesn’t know what happened, why it took him so long, and why he was biding his time.” Such interconnectedness of “fandom” and gaming spheres is then another trait typical of gaming subculture.

CONCLUSION

According to my observation, it is safe to conclude that gamers behave as a postmodern subculture. They are apolitical, the boundaries between gamers and non-gamers are blurred, and gamers often do not consider themselves to be gamers at all. Subcultures have undergone significant changes since the first studies of punk societies, a movement that is reflected in the changes of the society as a whole.