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**ONLINE GAMERS, LIVED EXPERIENCES AND
SENSE OF BELONGING: A STUDY OF STUDENTS
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE, BLOEMFONTEIN**

by

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Dissertation submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree

MAGISTER OF SOCIAL SCIENCE (The Narrative Study of Lives)

In the

FACULTY OF THE HUMANITIES

(Department of Sociology)

at the

UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE

August 2017

Bloemfontein, South Africa

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation submitted in completion of the degree Magister of Social Science (The Narrative Study of Lives) at the University of the Free State is my own, original work and has not been submitted previously at another university, faculty or department.

I furthermore concede copyright of this dissertation to the University of the Free State.

André Jacobus Pietersen

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August 2017

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge my appreciation towards Prof Jan K. Coetzee for providing me with the opportunity to conduct this research. Thank you for your mentorship and guidance throughout the whole dissertation. You saw potential in my work from the start and motivated me to always give my best. I have gained valuable insights and knowledge from you that I will carry with me on my future expeditions.

A special thank you to all the participants who partook in this project. Without you there would be no dissertation to begin with. Thank you for sharing your life stories with me and allowing me to investigate your personal lived experiences. With your help, hopefully I have accurately portrayed what it means to be an online gamer. Thank you for your time and patience during each interview. In each interview, I could clearly see the enjoyment and satisfaction video games have brought you over the years. To those who have lost most of their interest in video gaming, I hope you regain your interest by reading the stories of others.

To my parents, Lucas and Cecile, I do not have enough words to express my gratitude. Thank you for your unconditional support throughout the years. Thank you for supporting me in achieving my dreams and finding pride in your son. I hope that I will continue to always bring joy in your life and one day to return a fraction of all the things you have done for me.

To my beloved girlfriend, Monique, a special thank you as well. Without your love and support to motivate me throughout this dissertation and over the years, none of this would have been possible. Thank you for always being at my side and seeing more in me than I could ever see in myself. Thank you for your genuine interest in my dreams and your passion to help me reach them.

Thank you to all my friends and family members along with anyone that I might have left out. By listening to me and taking interest in my work you have made this journey a more pleasant one.

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SUMMARY

Video games are often viewed as a leisure activity meant as entertainment for children. When adults partake in video games, they are occasionally perceived with prejudice. However, video game popularity still increases significantly each year in many populations. One of the most popular genres of online video gaming is Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs). MMORPGs and online video game players are able to engage in a virtual world. In this world players can collaborate with other individuals to achieve a sense of emotional fulfilment upon completion of in-game objectives. Thus, video games provide people with an immersive experience. The aim of this study is to conduct a phenomenological exploration into online gamers' lived experiences of online gaming and their experiences of a sense of belonging to the associated online communities. The study seeks to gain an in-depth understanding of how online gamers become involved with online gaming and how this phenomenon becomes an important part of their lives.

The principles of interpretive and phenomenological research serve as theoretical foundations of this study. These principles guide the study to explore the participants' experiences through their own unique perspectives. Therefore, this study is concerned with how online gamers perceive their world (in video games and in real-life), how they experience its day-to-day interactions, the emotions they experience related to the events that occur within it, and how online gamers make sense of it all.

The research participants of this dissertation are comprised of young adults (between the ages of 18 and 25) who are enrolled at the University of the Free State. All participants are actively involved with online gaming or have been in the past. The data for this study are collected by using in-depth interviews. The aim of the interviews is to obtain rich and descriptive accounts of participants' narratives. In this study, the aim is to present the findings in such a way as to maintain the voices of the participants.

The findings of this study explore various aspects of the life stories of online gamers. It seeks to establish a narrative of how a person can become involved in online gaming and how it can evolve into something that is a part of his/her daily life. This study showcases that online gaming can have a crucial influence on a person's life. A person can become passionate about online gaming and this can cause impressions on

his/her identity and interpersonal connections. The findings explore how video games can have an influence on participants' perception of reality. Immersion is an aspect of this study that illustrates how video games are able to pull players into another reality and take their focus away from the real world. This can lead to feelings of intense joy and excitement, but can also lead to escapism. Furthermore, the findings of this study explore the stigmas and stereotypes that participants experience daily. Prejudice still exists towards people who play video games, but most stereotypes do not play a crucial role in the participants' lives. Lastly, the study explores how participants experience the community of the online video game world. The community of online video games offer various experiences. It can be a positive experience and players can feel a connection with random strangers online. However, anonymity between players can provide a negative environment that causes people to feel isolated from the community.

Key terms: phenomenology, social constructivism, online video gaming, MMORPGs (Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games), lived experiences, sense of belonging, immersion, socialisation, passion, identity, stereotypes.

Introduction

The study of online video games is relatively new in the field of sociology with new theoretical understandings frequently emerging to the forefront. Playing video games and interacting with other players in the online world is often seen as an activity for recreational purposes. However, video games provide players opportunities to create meaningful life experiences. Players are able to live and immerse themselves into another world. Thus, interest in online video games has increased in the last decade and people across the world take part in this experience. In South Africa, many people from across different age groups also partake in this phenomenon.

Online video games provide the opportunity for millions of people to play games and interact with other players on a daily basis. When an individual steps into the virtual world of an online video game, he/she can be immersed into another reality. Within this reality players are presented with various possibilities to partake in. In an instant, a player can socialise with personal friends over long distances. Thus, making location restriction irrelevant. A player can decide whether or not to approach another player and then befriend this stranger. Over time strangers can become close friends and maintain a personal connection. Online video games make it possible to meet a romantic partner and increase the intensity their relationship by playing together. Moreover, online video games offer players fulfilment of their interpersonal and social needs. When a player becomes a part of an online gaming group, he/she can feel a sense of connection with other people. A player becomes a part of a community and feels that his/her actions matter. However, online video games also present a negative side. Being immersed into another reality has significant influences on players. Players might find themselves comparing real-life with the virtual reality and find that video game realities seem better. This leads to individuals wanting to escape their current reality. Negative attitudes and behaviour from other people in online video games can drive people to no longer find pleasure in video gaming – often ending their engagement with video games they played most of their life. Too much competitiveness in online video games and community members who feel no connection with other members causes players to avoid video games. There are

several key aspects of online video games and each player has a unique perspective on his/her journey in the online world.

To gain a deeper understanding of the abovementioned aspects of online gaming this dissertation makes use of an interpretive phenomenological approach. The phenomenological paradigm seeks to gain a deeper understanding of the everyday life-worlds of research participants through their subjective interpretations. Phenomenology seeks to establish this deeper understanding by exploring and investigating several aspects of online gamers' live experiences. The focus lies on how online gamers perceive their world, how they feel about it, how they make sense of it, and how they understand and experience it. Therefore, the aim of this dissertation is to gain an understanding of what online gaming means to an individual and how it becomes a substantial part of their daily life. With this dissertation, the aim is to gain insight into the world of online gamers and to indicate how these individuals experience this world on a day to day basis. It is the stories of the gamers that are interpreted in order to come to an understanding of the meaning which participants attribute to online gaming.

In this dissertation, eight in-depth interviews are held with eight students who are enrolled as students at the University of the Free State. The goal of the interviews is to explore the narratives and lived experiences of online gamers in order to gain a deeper understanding of why gaming is such an important part of their lives. In chapter 4 and 5, the findings of this dissertation are presented through six main themes each with subsequent themes. The six themes aim to illustrate the reality of how a person can become an online gamer and how online gaming can become a crucial part of an individual's life. The aim is to showcase the different experiences possible within the online video game worlds. To illuminate to others that, while online video gaming might seem to be an ordinary activity enjoyed by many people, it can have a meaningful impact on a person's life.

Chapter 1: Theoretical framework

The purpose of this chapter is to establish a theoretical framework within which the study will be contextualised. This study focuses on viewing an aspect of society, namely the lived experiences of online gamers enrolled as students at the University of the Free State through a sociological eyeglass. Social research can be conducted within the context of various approaches; this study will take place within a phenomenological paradigm, which seeks to gain a deeper understanding of the everyday life-worlds of individuals through their respective subjective interpretations (Drummond, et al. 2010; Kendall, 2011). Due to the phenomenological emphasis, this research will be conducted in a qualitative manner.

1.1. The importance of sociology and sociological research

The study of society and the interactions within it help us to gain a better understanding of how behaviour is formed (Misgeld, 1983). The interactions an individual has with their community helps to mould their behaviour, and, at the same time, contribute to social reality. People tend to be unaware of these constant interactions, between their own individual self and the larger society, that are being played out in their everyday lives. Sociology and, more specifically, social research, aims at investigating, exploring, and understanding the impact of society on all individuals as well as the impact that individuals have on society (Kendall, 2011). The purpose of this study is to explore the interactions of persons involved with the phenomenon of online gaming. This activity can be seen as a part of the individual's daily life that has a direct impact on how the person lives within a specific society.

In order to live together, members of a society need to understand each other and themselves. By making use of common sense or intuition, people can comprehend situations in their daily lives through past and personal experiences (Inglis & Thorpe, 2012; Kendall, 2011). However, sometimes this common-sense thinking can be misleading. Therefore, sociologists' goals are to gain a clearer picture as to why and how people make sense of their daily experiences (Inglis & Thorpe, 2012: 4). In this study, the goal is to obtain a clearer picture of the experiences and interpretations of online gamers. By doing this, I hope to contribute to a better understanding of modern

society and its influence on individual behaviour. In online gaming, each player creates their own way of making sense of what happens within this environment, and, in turn, each one attaches their own meaning to events that occur in that space (Goodson & Gill, 2011). This study seeks to interpret the narratives or stories that persons who involve themselves in the phenomenon of online gaming will share with me, the researcher.

People understand their daily lives through relying on their acquired common sense and intuition, and sociologists gain further knowledge of human behaviour through the use and interpretation of the research participants' accounts of their experiences. By observing and collecting empirical information from society, a sociologist can add meaning to and elaborate on the aspect of common sense (Kendall, 2011). Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), as founding father of quantitative sociology, puts emphasis on the idea that people's actions are highly influenced by their environment, and by the concrete reality or social facts within which they live. Durkheim proposes that social facts are the foundation of societies, and that these facts exercise control over individuals (Kendall, 2011). Therefore, Durkheim argues that the best way to conduct sociological research is to direct the focus on investigating these concrete facts of society rather than the experiences of the individual. For Durkheim, sociological research in practice should be based on the basic principle that social facts must be studied as realities that determine social action and that are external to the individual (Lemert, 2010). Therefore, realities exist outside of the consciousness of the individual. If this is the case, then the only way a subject can be observed is in an objective and factual way (Lemert, 2010).

In contrast to Durkheim, Max Weber (1864-1920) argues that research on human and social action cannot be measured and studied through objective criteria only. Therefore, it would be problematic for sociologists to remain value free (Kendall, 2011). Weber's concept of *Verstehen* ("understanding" or "insight") constitutes a central idea when conducting social research. When sociological researchers utilise *Verstehen*, these researchers allow themselves to see the world as others see it (Kendall, 2011). *Verstehen* can be defined as the task the researcher executes whenever they attempt to explain human social action (Abel, 1948, as cited in David, 2010). When the researcher sees the world as others see it, they gain an empathetic understanding of the possible different perspectives that can exist (Creswell, 2007).

Through *Verstehen*, one can seek to gain insight into the lived experiences of online gamers by placing ourselves in their shoes and understanding that they can have unique perspectives of the world that they live in every day.

This dissertation will be conducted within the broad context of Weber's *Verstehende Soziologie*. I therefore depart from the principle that, in every situation, the sociological phenomenon that is being researched has a predefinition (Oakes, 1977, as cited in David, 2010). Online gamers already have predefined interpretations and experiences of online gaming that I, the researcher, will not necessarily be aware of. Consequently, it is essential for me as researcher to determine how players identify and distinguish concepts within the phenomenon of online gaming. *Verstehen* allows me, as researcher, on the one hand, to mirror or reproduce the accounts of these individuals, and, on the other hand, to understand it empathetically (Kendall, 2011; Oakes, 1977, as cited in David, 2010).

1.2. Qualitative research in sociology

In the pre-sociological age of social sciences, the need to gather facts was not always of utmost importance. Theorists sometimes believed that pure rational thought was the only component necessary to deliver theories of the human nature (Sherman & Wood, 1979). It was argued that human beings could solve any problem in the real world by means of rationality and intellectual thought. Emile Durkheim was one of the first social scientists that focused on the observable facts of society, and he gathered statistics to make conclusions based on the data he had gathered (Kendall, 2011).

But it is not only quantitative sociologists such as Durkheim that value factual information. Qualitative researchers know that the meanings that individuals give are complex and are influenced by specific contexts of the individual's experience. Therefore, it is also important, in qualitative research, to make use of available facts. In addition to facts, emphasis is also on qualitative experiences and assessments. Using words as symbols and concepts to communicate cannot be easily measured through the use of scales. When working with words, we take the qualitative path. However, the use of the term qualitative research is an umbrella term applicable to a variety of qualitative research perspectives (Maree, 2013: 47). When a researcher uses a qualitative perspective, they, in essence, use a lens to help them look at their

research in a specific way. In other words, the researcher takes on a specific paradigm to understand human behaviour in the context of that paradigm. Ritzer explains a paradigm as:

“ . . . a fundamental image of the subject matter within a science. It serves to define what should be studied, what questions should be asked, how they should be asked, and what rules should be followed in interpreting the answers obtained. The paradigm is the broadest unit of consensus within a science and serves to differentiate one scientific community (or sub-community) from another. It subsumes, defines, and interrelates the exemplars, theories and methods and instruments that exist within it” (1975: 7).

Qualitative research makes use of different paradigms to tell the "stories" of individuals. The qualitative researcher knows that the experiences of individuals have subjective meaning, and, by using specific paradigms, a clear understanding can be achieved (Maree, 2013: 47-48). Qualitative research aims at gaining understanding of a particular phenomenon through the collection of descriptive data. The focus therefore lies in how members of society construct meaning out of their experiences. Paradigms are the foundations from which theories are produced. Sociological theories are attempts at explaining and interpreting the physical and social environments of the individual (Kinloch, 1977). Sociological theories can also go further and deal with social phenomena at the microscopic or interpersonal level. Therefore, the paradigm steers the direction of the research and the theories that can be used to explain or understand the problem or phenomena at hand.

1.2.1. Qualitative research can be naturalistic

Casting focus on the social action of individuals as it occurs in their everyday life allows the researcher to gain insight into how the individual constructs meaning from his/her experiences. The aim of qualitative research is to gain a deeper understanding of the social reality of individuals (Flick, 2009). To gain this understanding, the researcher can make use of methods such as gathering and exploring the personal accounts and experiences of participants (Kinloch, 1977). Through the combinations of personal accounts of the participants, and observation and recordings from the researcher, qualitative research has the advantage of being ecologically valid. If the research is ecologically valid, it means that the research has taken place in similar circumstances

as occur in the participant's everyday life (Maree, 2013; Stangor, 2015). In this case, research can then be understood through the same "lens" as is viewed by the participant. The researcher's focus is on the phenomenon in question, and in no way do they try to manipulate the phenomenon of interest in the study. The aim of a study guides the choice of research methods that will be used. Whether the researcher wishes to explore a phenomenon or to investigate the differences between conceptualised variables will be an important aspect that needs to be considered. Therefore, the use of naturalistic research is most appropriate for conducting research when the aim of the research is to explore, illuminate, and/or understand online gaming as an occurrence in the everyday life of university students (Maree, 2013: 78-79).

Within qualitative research, the researcher aims to obtain data through the use of unobtrusive data gathering techniques that do not disturb the "real-world" experience of the phenomena (Maree, 2013: 79). Techniques best suited for obtaining data without disrupting the situation are observations, document analysis, and interviews (Stangor, 2015). Through these techniques, the aim is to gather rich descriptions of the everyday experiences of the participants.

1.2.2. The ontology of qualitative research

Ontology refers to the nature of reality and asks the question "what is truth or reality?" (Flick, 2009). Qualitative research is different from positivistic research in the sense that it does not assume that there is only one reality. For positivist researchers, the world is external from the individual. In other words, whether the individual recognises the world or a phenomenon within it is irrelevant to the existence of the phenomenon, and the real world can be objectively measured through hard and tangible facts (Flick, 2009; Silverman, 2011). Therefore, the only way to understand the phenomena of the real world, for positivists, is to make use of scientific means and to discover the natural laws of society.

Qualitative research, on the other hand, does not reject the notion that the individual is external to the world, but it emphasises that each individual's cognition of the world is different from that of another. Through the use of symbols, which are human-constructed, the individual makes sense of the world in their own way (Maree, 2013).

A key focus is the motives of individuals and how meaning is attached to social interactions. Consequently, reality is subjective from one individual to another and can differ depending on how it is interpreted (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative research argues that reality cannot be separated from the researcher, and that the truth of the phenomenon does not exist independently from them. Therefore, in this dissertation, an understanding is reached that online gamers can have unique and subjective viewpoints on the matters of online gaming and that the social reality of this phenomenon is intangible.

1.2.3. The epistemology of qualitative research

Epistemology refers to how things can be known: how we conclude what is true or what the facts are, and how one comes to know that reality is all a part of epistemology. Epistemology also focuses on the ways we use to discover the nature of reality and discover how knowledge of this reality is produced (Creswell, 2007). Within qualitative research, the aim is to discover how others have constructed their realities. People have their own beliefs, attitudes, and assumptions of the world they live in, and each individual has a unique experience when it comes to a specific phenomenon. Qualitative research aims at finding links between individuals' "stories"/narratives and the experiences that they have lived through (Maree, 2013: 48). These narratives are the subjective views of the individuals, but qualitative research accepts them to be true, because those individuals have lived through those experiences and accept them to be their reality (Jacobsen, 2009). A fundamental concept of epistemology is that accurate knowledge about social life can be achieved by going to the source of those who actually experience it (Day, 2012). In other words, to close the bridge between the researcher and the source of the information, the researcher can gain more accurate descriptions of the meanings of the participants.

The findings of qualitative research cannot be generalised to cover the situation of all individuals. The aim, rather, of qualitative research, is to receive clarity on how individuals attach meaning to phenomena in a specific context. This leads to better understanding of aspects of human nature, rather than finding concrete and universally valid facts (Maree, 2013). Instead of looking for tangible measurements, the goal of qualitative research is to hear the voice of the participants. As the research continues, patterns and themes will emerge that can then be transferrable to other

situations (Ryan, et al. 2007). In essence, the researcher should strive to understand the view of the participant and accept that the participant's knowledge is what counts the most. Subjectivity is therefore unavoidable, because the views of the participant are observed through the lens of a human observer (the researcher) (Creswell, 2007: 38).

1.3. From hermeneutics towards an interpretivist perspective

1.3.1. Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is the study of the theory and practice of interpretation. Before the interpretivist perspective became well-developed, theorists focused on the reconstruction or translation of the intended meaning of the individual (Maree, 2013: 101). To gain understanding of the meaning, the interpreter had to place themselves in the same context as the individual in question. The belief arose that there could only be one true interpretation of the phenomenon (Maree, 2013; Stangor, 2015). However, qualitative research is filled with subjectivist elements and the knowledge that there are many truths. How an individual experiences their everyday life is true for them, as true as it is for the next person (Berger & Luckmann, 1991; Kendall, 2011). Nevertheless, the goal of the researcher is to gain knowledge differently than positivist perspectives do. Within hermeneutics, how knowledge is obtained is emphasised by intuition. Hermeneutics does not follow the path that seeks to acquire knowledge through a rational and discursive way. The path taken by hermeneutics to gain knowledge is to illuminate what was unseen and give a comprehensive overview of the subject (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2012). Max Weber's philosophy of *Verstehen* is a form of intuition that strives to understand the underlying meaning of the acts and texts of individuals (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2012; Kendall, 2011).

A main theme in hermeneutics derives its focus from the premise that "the meaning of a part can only be understood if it is related to the whole" (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2012: 92). A *hermeneutic circle* is formed when the whole is constantly interacting with a part, forming a basis. In other words, when a researcher is investigating a phenomenon, they cannot only look at the phenomenon as a whole. The researcher has to understand that the phenomenon in question consists of smaller parts, and that they are interacting with each other in turn, making a circle (Packer & Addison, 1989).

This circle consists of the ongoing movement from where the researcher begins with a hypothesis, moves to revision of the hypothesis to adjust it, and then revising the adapted hypothesis to complete the circle. Only when the researcher understands that each phenomenon as a whole has a foundation made out of parts, can the researcher gain better understanding of the meaning of the phenomenon (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2012). The process of gaining knowledge within this circle can also be seen as a spiral, moving from the outside towards the inside, closing in on the phenomenon.

At first, the researcher shows interest in a phenomenon. However, at that point, the view is set on the phenomenon as a whole. After the initial exposure to the whole phenomenon, the researcher seeks to gain a better understanding of how it is interpreted, how meaning is attached to it, and how the parts within it interact with each other (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2012). The focus lies now with specific parts. Only after gaining an understanding of the parts on their own can the researcher stand back and begin to perceive the whole again (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2012). Take the following as an example: A mechanic wants to understand why an engine is not working properly. The problem cannot be instantly identified; that the engine as a whole is broken. To gain a better understanding, the mechanic will first look at the different parts of the engine separately. When the mechanic has gone through the different parts to gain an understanding of the functioning of each part, the different parts have to be seen together in order to form a clear picture of the whole. It is a process of going back and forth between the parts and the whole, and this brings a progressively deeper understanding of both the parts and the whole of the phenomenon (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2012).

Qualitative research as a whole is a process of following the parts that take the study on different paths. If certain paths remain untaken, the picture might be obscured, and the “story” might be reconstructed/translated differently than how it would have been told by the author of the story (Maree, 2013; Ryan, et al. 2007). In qualitative research the concept of data saturation is used, which means to continue exploring and collecting data until no new insights are forthcoming (Stangor, 2015). In other words, all paths should be followed until their dead ends have been reached in order to construct the clearest picture of the phenomenon. However, the paths taken should be noted and documented. The reason for this is for other researchers to be able to follow the same paths and understand why the original researcher took these specific

paths in the first place (Ryan, et al. 2007). It makes qualitative research more dependable and repeatable, which in turn makes the study more empirical and reliable.

Hermeneutics requires the researcher to be able to place him/herself in the place of the author of the phenomenon or lived experience. This is possible through the use of empathy, and allows the researcher to gain an understanding of the actions, affections, or attitudes of the author (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2012). Intuition makes it possible for a person to use their imagination to broaden the knowledge they have. The researcher is often unaware of the motives of the person in the study. By using intuition to imagine the thought processes of the author, the researcher can allow themselves to open up to the possibility of different truths that exist (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2012; Flick, 2009). Returning to empathy, a researcher should aim at re-enacting past experiences (by the use of imagination). The reason for this is because the actions of individuals have two sides, an outside and an inside. The outside of an action is the behaviour itself. The researcher observes the action of the person, however, it is the inside face of the action where the meaning comes from (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2012). Empathy fills and enriches the reasoning behind actions by the researcher placing themselves in the position of the subject. Qualitative researchers have to be empathetic to fully understand the experiences of their subjects. When exploring the narratives of online gamers, I as researcher should be empathetic and place myself in the position of the participants in order to gain a deeper understanding of the choices they have made that lead to their unique experiences.

1.3.2. Existential hermeneutics

Existential hermeneutics focuses on being-in-the-world, where the individual is cast into the world of existence and has to find their own way. The individual is “always already” in the world (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2012; Corey, 2014). Therefore, out of existential hermeneutics comes the study of the individual in concrete situations of life. Intuition is also an important aspect for existential hermeneutics to gain knowledge. Through gaining knowledge we can be liberated from illusions. The experiences of individuals offer vast amounts of knowledge full of the contexts from their existence (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2012). Existential hermeneutics aims at understanding the contexts of individuals to realise the possibilities of our existence. Even striving to

understand the small occurrences of everyday life is a path to better self-understanding (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2012; Jacobsen, 2009).

1.4. The interpretivist perspective within qualitative research

Over time, several different approaches regarding hermeneutics have been developed. Approaches such as constructivism, phenomenology, and critical theory are, at present, important perspectives to understand and gain meaning of the experiences of individuals (Maree, 2013: 58-59). These approaches all begin with the assumption that gaining access to the reality or truth of the phenomenon is through social constructions such as shared meanings, consciousness, and language. People attach their own meanings to their experiences, making each life event something that is unique to that individual. Therefore, the focus of interpretivists is to endeavour on a road to gain an understanding of the phenomena people experience in their everyday life, but also emphasising the meaning that they themselves attach to it (Seale, et al. 2007). In this regard, the concept of *Verstehen* is important, because it is the reason why interpretivist thinking treats the individual and their actions as the basic unit of analysis in research (Weber, 1981, as cited in David, 2010). In other words, the individual is the agent of meaningful behaviour, and all other processes in everyday life are considered as conditions or objects to the agent. Through interpretivist thinking and the concept of *Verstehen*, this dissertation seeks to explore how online gamers understand and view their realities through their subjective perspectives and experiences.

Maree (2013: 59-60) explains that the interpretivist perspective is based on five main assumptions. The first assumption is that the only way to understand human life is to understand it from within. People interact and relate with each other in their everyday life. The social world is a construction of the shared meanings of each individual's subjective experience. Therefore, human life cannot be observed from the outside or from an external reality. However, for interpretive sociology, emphasis is on understanding and explaining the meaningful social actions in the precise terms of its meaningful aspects (Fulbrook, 1978, as cited in David, 2010). Having shared meanings, means that people use unique terms and definitions within their social world or "life-world" that the researcher might not be acquainted with (Inglis & Thorpe, 2012: 89-90). Therefore, to make the research more genuine and effective, the researcher

should aim at using the same terminology and meaningful aspects that people use to interpret their lives. When the researcher remains faithful to the description of the phenomena, the study's credibility will increase (Ryan, et al. 2007). In other words, there should be a consistency between what the participant in the research said, and how the researcher interprets it.

The second assumption of the interpretivist perspective states that social life is characteristically constituted of human beings (Maree, 2013: 59). Husserl (as cited in Maree, 2013: 59) formulates that reality is not objectively determined, but that it is socially constructed. To better understand the perceptions of people on their own experiences and activities, it is better to study them in their social contexts rather than in isolation. In this aspect, interpretivist thinking defers from positivist approaches where research is done in a laboratory or an experimental environment. For most quantitative research, the aim is to identify which variable impacts on the observed phenomena (other variables). The researcher manipulates the environment in order to gain more concrete insight (Stangor, 2015). However, for interpretivists, the aim is to keep the environment as natural as possible. Through this the interactions between the participants and their environments can be seen more clearly, and with that the meanings can be better understood (Kendall, 2011).

"The human mind is the purposive source or origin of meaning" (Maree, 2013: 59). The third assumption therefore argues that interpretivist thinking aims at revealing how meanings are constructed. Individuals attach meaning to actions and experiences and they do this by means of their emotions, motives, insights, and plans (Burger, 1977, as cited in David, 2010). Through understanding how people create meanings and attach them to experiences, we can improve our comprehension of the whole of the phenomenon. In order to achieve this task, the researcher needs to explore the richness, depth and complexity of the phenomenon.

The fourth assumption of Maree (2013: 60) is that humans gain knowledge of the social world, and that their behaviour is affected by that knowledge. As mentioned, people create their own realities to comprehend their social world. However, interpretivist thinking proposes that there is no single reality in as far as a phenomenon is concerned, and that instead there are multiple realities that exist that are different from each other (Fulbrook, 1978, as cited in David, 2010). These realities are different

across time and place: how one individual perceives an event can be different from another individual, and can be remembered differently. Interpretivist thinking does not stop at exploring only one reality. To develop our understanding of the social world, interpretivist thinking studies all possible paths to reality to enrich the theoretical framework of existing knowledge. There is then a relationship that forms between theory and research. We research the world to gain an understanding of it, but it is only possible to do so within the context of a theoretical foundation. Social theory allows us to do research, and in turn, the knowledge gained from research impacts on social theory, and might even change social theory as we know it (Maree, 2013: 59-60). Theory helps us to make the links between what we think we know, and what we see in the real world. Theories can aim at predicting future outcomes such as human behaviour, but it might also just seek to understand why people attach certain meanings to certain experiences (Stangor, 2015).

The last assumption states that the social world does not “exist” independently from human knowledge (Maree, 2013: 60). While conducting qualitative research, our own knowledge and understanding of phenomena exercises an influence on us. We might try to remain objective, but our own subjectivity is always present (Inglis & Thorpe, 2012). The research we choose, how we ask the questions, and how we interpret the views of our participants are greatly influenced by our own perceptions and experiences (Kendall, 2011). No research method can be completely unbiased. Even the most positivist approaches have elements of subjectivity in them. The interest of the researcher guides the study and determines the specific methods used to conduct the research. Therefore, the researcher should be aware that their own knowledge and worldview can have an impact on the study (Stangor, 2015). The assumption continues that the unique experiences we encounter in our own lives impact our knowledge and understanding (Maree, 2013: 60). Intuition guides the path of how we investigate the phenomenon, and therefore we cannot conceive the world as an external reality that is independent from our own knowledge. “The ultimate aim of interpretivist research is to offer a perspective of a situation and to analyse the situation under study to provide insight into the way in which a particular group of people make sense of their situation or the phenomena they encounter” (Maree, 2007: 60).

Qualitative research offers richness, depth of explorations, and thick descriptions. These aspects make qualitative research a viable method as it offers to gain an

understanding of human life, and not to deliver the occurrences taking place in the world just as it stands (Stangor, 2015). The down side of qualitative research, that it is often critiqued for, is that the researcher is the instrument and that subjectivity impacts on the research too much. Generalisations are not possible when it comes to qualitative research in the sense that a whole population cannot be placed in the same category, and for certain paradigms this aim is essential (Maree, 2013; Kvale, 2007). However, it is possible for the researcher to counteract this critique. By clearly documenting the steps taken in the research process and the paths that lead the researcher to specific findings, the study can become more dependable (Ryan, et al. 2007). When an outsider can read through the research and arrive at similar conclusions, the study is dependable. Generalisations towards larger populations might not be possible for qualitative research, however, it is possible to make the findings transferable to other situations (Silverman, 2011). It is possible that the findings of the research can help other individuals to understand similar circumstances. The contexts can be similar, and the problems that the person is experiencing can be helped by the findings of qualitative research (Ryan, et al. 2007). Returning to the aim of qualitative research, namely to strive for a better understanding of the human experience, is key to improve our knowledge and expand our theoretical framework: we can see that the transferability of qualitative research can be very helpful.

The goal with interpretivist thinking is to develop an account where the researcher aims to organise their understandings of the participants' understanding of their world into a cohesive, narrative interpretation (Packer & Addison, 1989). While gathering the narratives of the participants, the researcher can make use of various methods such as interviews, recordings, or field notes while observing (Stangor, 2015). However, interpretivist researchers should always reflect on their notes and understandings in order to ensure that their interpretations reflect the views of their participants (Ryan, et al. 2007). To give an interpretivist account, the researcher should be immersed in the world that they are investigating. Reflecting on the data and analysing their notes after the interviews allows the researcher to see the patterns and themes that might arise from the data (Packer & Addison, 1989). Allowing oneself to be immersed in the perceptions of participants increases empathy towards them. To understand what everyday life feels like for the participant can help us in gaining more understanding

(Packer & Addison, 1989). By being aware and fully focused on the narrative of the participant, one becomes immersed into the lived experiences of online gaming, allowing for a clearer picture of the phenomenon.

1.5. The phenomenological paradigm

Throughout this chapter, the aim has been to showcase how qualitative research and interpretivist thinking illuminate the methods of how researchers endeavour to gather in-depth knowledge from their participants. Qualitative research is an umbrella term that entails several paradigms that focus on understanding the individual's perceptions of their own unique experience. Phenomenology falls under qualitative research and this paradigm complements what qualitative research and interpretivist thinking aims to establish. Phenomenology focuses on the consciousness of the individual. Conducting research under the phenomenological paradigm not only requires that the phenomenon should be understood through the point of view of the participant, but that the feelings and emotions experienced by the individual should be understood as well (Inglis & Thorpe, 2012; Jacobsen, 2009). "Phenomenology is concerned with how particular persons or groups of people see, perceive, understand, experience, make sense of, respond to, emotionally feel about and engage with particular objects or circumstances."(Inglis & Thorpe, 2012: 87).

Phenomenological sociology argues that it is problematic for social sciences to identify the sense, organisation, and rationality which people attach to their actions, unless the social scientist deals with human conduct and its common sense interpretation in social reality (Misgeld, 1983). People interact with each other on a daily basis. Phenomenologists are interested in the contexts within which these interactions take place. The term used to describe the context where people act and interact is called everyday life (Kendall, 2011). To conduct qualitative research, the researcher has to rely on their intuition to gather knowledge and to interpret it (Maree, 2013). In everyday life, people also make use of their intuition to guide them through the events of the day. Phenomenology emphasises that all individuals have practical consciousness to help them on this path with intuition (Inglis & Thorpe, 2012: 86-87). In everyday life, people go through their day without actively concentrating on each and every task. Most tasks a person has to execute happen automatically without the person having

to stop and think or plan ahead what the next step is. Naturally, practical consciousness had to be learned from others, and then practiced over time. At a very young age, we are incapable of dressing, feeding, and cleaning ourselves. We have to be taught by our caretakers through the years of our development. However, after learning and practicing these tasks, we start to become familiar with them. Over time, these tasks become simple and we can do them without thinking about it. At this stage, these tasks have become habituated to us (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). Similar principles apply to the research focus of this dissertation. Habituation can be linked to how people become gamers. They learn from others how to start this activity, not knowing what it is or how to interact with it. After learning the basic capabilities that are offered through online gaming, the person starts to become comfortable with it and repeats the actions over and over. Repeating actions within the games then becomes a habit and in turn becomes a part of the individual's everyday life (Jacobsen, 2009).

Phenomenology might not be that interested in understanding the tasks we learn in our early youth, but the tasks we learn later in life hold more insight into the human consciousness. For instance, humans make complex tasks a part of their routine too, without having to think much about it. Practical consciousness allows us to make interactions with society a lot easier than we often realise. Inglis and Thorpe (2012: 93-94) explain that social order exists because practical consciousness makes action and interaction possible. When people make use of public transportation or financial facilities, they are using practical consciousness. A person expects that, when they arrive at the bus stop, the bus will arrive on time and transport them to the destination they desire. A person also expects that, when they use their credit card, it would allow them to purchase items (Inglis & Thorpe, 2012: 94). Phenomenologists argue that these tasks are complex at first, but that people learn them and it becomes a part of their routine. Only when interruptions occur in their everyday life are people forced to move out of their practical consciousness and think about what to do next. For example, when the bus has already gone, a person has to find out whether to take the next bus or to create alternative methods of transportation. Finding out the arrival time of the next bus and deciding to wait or not is how we step out of practical consciousness. In some instances, the individual learns from their own life experience. However, sociologists should always be aware that individuals are influenced by others' thoughts as well (Lemert, 2010). An individual thinks further about what others

have thought before them. With this in mind, a social researcher should be aware that individuals have unique responses and can adapt to situations differently than how they were taught or how people would normally act in any given situation. Thus, when exploring the everyday life of an individual, one should be open to new experiences and insights. One should not search for the expected outcomes of what has been researched in the literature, but only use it as a guide to broaden the knowledge of the phenomenon.

Within phenomenology, there are different approaches to gaining an understanding of social life. At its core, phenomenology seeks to understand how individuals make sense of the perceptions they have of the world, and that practical consciousness is the foundation for action and interaction (Inglis & Thorpe, 2012; Burger, 1977). Over time, phenomenology has branched out to attempt to explain other phenomena in everyday life. How people construct their own realities, and how social structures impact our perceptions and actions are some of the different angles of phenomenology (Inglis & Thorpe, 2012).

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) was a German philosopher that laid the foundation for the development of interpretivist social theory and, in turn, the development of phenomenology. Kant philosophised that each object in the world has two sides, namely, the noumenal side, and the phenomenal side (Inglis & Thorpe, 2012; Flick, 2009). Human beings cannot comprehend the noumenal side, because the real world exists outside of their perceptions. The way humans view each object in the world and create their own perceptions of it is the phenomenal world. For Kant, the noumenal world is not concrete, and therefore meaningless. However, our minds create the structure needed to cast meaning onto the world and its objects. In other words, our experiences of the world are only based on how our mind has constructed it for us (Inglis & Thorpe, 2012). When looking through Kant's viewpoint of how meaning is created by our own minds, it's important to be able to relate this to video and online gaming. Games exist in virtual realities and do not exist in the "real" world. However, our minds can create a reality for us in the game that can lead to real experiences and perceptions.

The early Kantian philosophy argued that the phenomenal worlds of each human being are the same. The structures of our brains are the same, and that led to the

conclusion that our perceptions of the world are the same. However, perceptions differ from culture to culture. Culture teaches us to view objects and events in certain ways, and guides our actions and interactions within society (Baumeister & Bushman, 2011). Culture teaches us language and how to use that language to communicate with other members of a society. With language and symbols, we create the means to interpret objects and events in the world. Therefore, because of different cultures, perceptions will be different between human beings. Cultures can arise out of the world of online gaming as well, creating languages shared between players and shared experiences that connect individuals to one another (Badrinarayanan, Sierra, & Taute, 2014; Baumeister & Bushman, 2011). An outsider might not be familiar with the language and jargon used between online gamers. This study's phenomenological approach seeks to explore the worlds of online gamers through their eyes, and, therefore, should submerge itself in the culture of online gaming in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon (Jacobsen, 2009).

The mind of the individual perceives the world within which it is situated, and those perceptions construct the individual's reality. Although we cannot gain access to the real world of noumena, phenomenologists seek to study how people create their own worlds with their minds (Inglis & Thorpe, 2012: 88). Another German philosopher, Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), emphasised how the human mind makes sense of the world by being constantly active and picking up on things in the world. Husserl was more focused on how the human consciousness works in general, rather than the specific meanings placed on situations by specific people or groups (Inglis & Thorpe, 2012: 89). Phenomenology developed in the direction where researchers were more interested in understanding the viewpoints from the individual as they exist in a shared everyday world. People live in shared time and place, and they interact with each other within this context to gain shared experiences. Phenomenologists call this existence a "life-world" (Overgaard & Zahavi, 2009). However, it is not enough to look at the individual in isolation. People live together and interact with each other on a daily basis, and, because of this, people create shared meanings and perceptions. Culture is a strong external force that can influence behaviour. Culture is also passed from generation to generation. This leads to groups that can have the same perceptions and meaning of objects and situations in the world (Baumeister & Bushman, 2011). Although each individual can have a unique experience in any situation, there is

constantly a process of inter-subjectivity where meanings and perceptions are shared between people (Inglis & Thorpe, 2012: 89).

A person enters the world with a subjective viewpoint, but in essence realises that other people share the same life-world as them. Therefore, because of the subjective nature each individual has, different perceptions come to exist (Sokolowski, 2008). However, because we are conscious and empathetic beings, we are able to shift our perspectives to allow us to view the world from others' eyes. Through this, people are able to "share" their life-world views with each other (Drummond, et al. 2010). Inter-subjectivity makes interaction between members of the same culture easier. For instance, a person might meet a stranger in the world, but they are from the same cultural background. Interaction is eased for them, because they might have shared perceptions or have the same cultural values. They might have similar outlooks on social constructs like sports and religion, or even political views that can stimulate interaction. Phenomenologists are interested in understanding how these meanings can be shared and how these interactions between people take place (Overgaard & Zahavi, 2009). In this dissertation, by focusing on people that partake in gaming, I seek to explore whether gaming can create a culture that assimilates shared perceptions and commonalities between participants that allows them to have shared meanings with each other.

Alfred Schutz (1899-1959) was another scholar who described the life-world of the human being as the ordinary or mundane everyday world in which people operate (Inglis & Thorpe, 2012; Overgaard & Zahavi, 2009). Schutz's works offer us ways to describe the details of how people experience specific events in their lives. Culture ties in with life-world and how people use common sense to experience the world. For Schutz, culture creates people's life-worlds and common sense. Instead of practical consciousness, Schutz uses the term "natural attitude" to describe how individuals go about their everyday life (Inglis & Thorpe, 2012: 90). Life-worlds make action and interaction possible, and only when the routines of a person is disrupted does that person step out of their natural attitude to evaluate the situation. This can lead to changes being made in their life-world, and, in turn, actions and interactions can also be changed. This corresponds with Berger and Luckmann's concept of habituation of how people have a natural attitude towards their daily routines and do not actively think about what they are doing (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). In this narrative study of

lives I seek to pull online gamers out of their practical consciousness and natural attitudes in order to allow them to consciously contemplate their habits of online gaming. By allowing them to recreate their lived experiences through stories they allow me to enter their life-worlds in order to gain a clearer picture of the phenomenon.

When phenomenologists investigate the perceptions and experiences of people in the world, they are exposed to the way people make sense of their lives. They understand their own perceptions and do not need to explain it to themselves. However, the researcher often uses a different set of concepts than their participants. People place their thoughts, meanings, and understandings in categories that make sense to them. Schutz referred to these categories as “first order” categories that people use to guide their actions and interactions without being aware of it (Inglis & Thorpe, 2012: 90-91). After studying the life-worlds of people, phenomenologists have to analyse and explain the first order categories to other social analysts. The researcher creates their own “second order” category to understand the mental categories of the participant (Inglis & Thorpe, 2012: 90-92). However, the participant’s own experience is much more complex than they might be aware of, and in the process of describing their experiences of their life-world might leave out details and particularities. A researcher should aim at achieving consistency between the descriptions of their own second order categories and the first order categories of the participants.

The goal is to illuminate the views of the participant and accurately reconstruct it. If this is achieved, the study reveals the research participant’s reality (Ryan, et al. 2007). To make this task possible, phenomenologists use “typifications” that represent the thought processes of the first order categories. These typifications allow people to automatically sort objects and situations in the world into the categories to make sense of their lives in their minds (Inglis & Thorpe, 2012: 91). When we are exposed to a new phenomenon, our mind has to learn what it is. After we have learned what the phenomenon is and does, we can store it in our minds and make it a part of our natural attitude (Weiten, 2010). An example is when a person learns what a video game is. At first, the person perceives an object that can be interacted with to conduct an activity. We learn that these objects are called video games. Now our mind classifies that all games have to look similar and do the same. Our mind can take it even further and categorise the fact that games serve a purpose, such as entertaining people. This example illustrates how the practical consciousness is formed. Phenomenology

wishes to study these perceptions from the viewpoints of the participant, and then use the language of sociology to explain the typifications to other social researchers (Inglis & Thorpe, 2012).

1.6. Social constructionist thinking

How reality is constructed is significant to social constructionists. For them, reality is not something naturally given (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2012). People experience their everyday life and accept that the daily occurrence of events is the nature of how things are in life. Social constructionist thinking looks at how realities are and questions whether or not they are inevitable. To take it even further, social constructionist perspectives argue that some phenomena are not as self-evident as they seem, and that in certain aspects life would be different or even better without it (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2012). For example, people may accept that the negative treatment they receive from their employers is something that occurs in every workplace. They would accept it as reality and would not question it. Social constructionist thinking aims at exploring these perceptions and raising awareness that realities can change. It is important to note that not all forms of social constructionist thinking aim at changing social realities, and that many of these theorists are neutral to these phenomena.

Berger and Luckmann argued that the origins of social phenomena are produced out of human consciousness (Inglis & Thorpe, 2012: 93-95). Human consciousness makes it possible for social order to exist in society. The consciousness is constructed in such a way that patterns and regularities are formed to create social order. Without social order, actions and interactions would not be possible within society. Habituation is also an important aspect for Berger and Luckmann. Over time, actions and interactions are produced and reproduced. These actions are man-made facets that are repeated over time until it becomes an institution within society (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2012). People often do not realise the impact of these man-made institutions, and feel that these institutions exert control over them. Social action and interactions are viewed as habits that were always present, and people tend to forget that these habits were a product of human consciousness (Inglis & Thorpe, 2012).

People believe that their habits have always existed, and that there are only certain ways to do things in their everyday life. Berger and Luckmann state that people

formulate “recipes” or heuristics known as mental shortcuts (Akram & Hogan, 2015) for doing certain things in certain ways (Inglis & Thorpe, 2012: 95). These recipes seem to be the natural way of doing things, and people do not necessarily question them, because they believe it is the way things are (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2012). An example of a social interaction that has become a recipe or a typification is language. Humans have created a form of communication to allow social interaction. This form of communication has been produced and reproduced for a long period of time until it becomes institutionalised into the group or society (Inglis & Thorpe, 2012: 95). People no longer question the reality or origin of language and accept it as a natural occurrence in their everyday life. These institutions that are created by humans in the first place then begin to be perceived as external phenomena that have always existed in the individual’s life-world. This process is known as externalisation and objectification (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2012). It is important for phenomenologists to be aware of how people construct their realities. If researchers wish to understand the experiences and interactions in a person’s everyday life, they have to be aware of the attitudes and emotions the person has towards the phenomena of interest.

Another approach situated in phenomenology is existential phenomenology. Similar to the ideas about the construction of reality from Berger and Luckmann, existential phenomenology developed to gain an understanding of how people view their life-world from their own perspectives (Inglis & Thorpe, 2012: 101). Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) states that people’s knowledge of their reality can only be interpreted from their point of view. Language comes into play again, for it is the only way humans share and interpret their realities (Inglis & Thorpe, 2012). For existential phenomenologists, people’s perceptions and consciousness exist in certain times and places within their life-worlds.

1.7. The existential self

Sociologists investigating the self have a main assumption, which is that change is a constant feature of people’s lives (Kotarba, 2009). People’s senses of themselves do not remain the same over the entire period of their lives. In existential sociology, everyday life is viewed as a dramatic process that is unique from one person to another. However, there are central foci that existentialism seeks to understand. Each individual, when realising his/her existence, would want to know who they are, or what

their purpose is in the larger sense of reality (Kotarba, 2009). Heidegger states that we exist in the world and should not try to think of ourselves as beings apart from the world into which we were thrown. The routines or habits we institutionalise are methods we use to fill our everyday lives. However, we should not assume that we are going to live forever, and we should rather seek to live life with “authentic experiences” (Corey, 2014). Phenomenology seeks to study these authentic experiences as well to gain a deeper understanding of the human condition (Inglis & Thorpe, 2012: 86-87).

“ . . . ‘existentialism’, and this view tends to place a much greater emphasis on individuals, their choices, their responsibilities, their passions, their cowardice, their virtues and so on.” (Kotarba, 2009: 142).

As mentioned, phenomenology also seeks to understand the emotions and attitudes of individuals from their own experiences. Feelings make out the core of human beings and are a part of our everyday life. Social actions and interactions are highly influenced by our emotions, and in a sense, constitute the foundation of all society (Kotarba, 2009). Therefore, the understanding of the existential self has become much more important in recent studies done by sociologists. The reason for this is the increasing interest in self-actualisation of the individual.

“ . . . the tendency towards self-actualisation is the motive that underlies all behaviour. Realising his or her true potential is the individual’s ultimate goal. It is what human development finally leads to. Theoretically, it lies within every individual’s reach and requires no change in a person’s basic nature. All that is needed is for the individual to discover what is already there and to allow it to flourish.” (Meyer, Moore, & Viljoen, 2008: 338).

The self is still largely unexplained, and traditional models of conceptualising the self are somewhat inefficient (Kotarba, 2009). The existential self focuses on the individual’s unique experience of being within the context of social conditions. In other words, the existential self is in constant search of “becoming” (Kotarba, 2009). Values, creativity, and emotions are all aspects of being. Therefore, for phenomenologists to focus on the perceptions of the individual without including the self is insufficient. Applying the self to the phenomenon of online gaming, it is important to explore the values and emotions that gamers experience in their life-worlds, as well as their perceptions of themselves.

It is essential to acknowledge the role of emotions when exploring the narratives of individuals, because emotion can be seen as the driving force behind all aspects of the human experience (Goodson & Gill, 2011). Within the naturalistic approach, the notion of rationality is important, because it helps the researcher remain objective towards the research. However, emotions are an essential aspect for narrative research, because it influences how an individual perceives reality and attach meaning to events. Individuals engaged in online gaming experience a wide range of emotions. Emotions such as passion and loneliness can be seen as motives for these persons to be involved in this activity (Fuster, et al. 2014). Therefore, exploring the emotions that are experienced by these individuals are important when attempting to accurately illuminate the narratives of online gamers.

Emotions can be a difficult aspect of the human experience to research. Each individual can have a subjective interpretation towards an event and the emotions that he/she is experiencing in that moment. Therefore, objectively investigating or exploring emotions of a person can be problematic. However, emotions are researchable if the methods of researching them are adapted. Through adapting interviews and observations, the researcher can aim to collect "emotion data" that serve as findings in the narrative (Flam, 2015, as cited in Flam & Kleres, 2015). Two simple ways of researching emotions are to ask people to describe their emotions and communicate with the person about their feelings, or to observe their behaviour on what emotions they are currently experiencing.

In this study, the focus will remain on interviewing online gamers on their experienced emotions, while observing body language and speech during the interview. The use of language is of importance when it comes to the collection of data on emotion, because people use words to express what they are feeling. To understand the perceptions and attitudes of a person, the researcher must allow the participant to express the specific emotional responses they are experiencing towards the phenomena (Katriel, as cited in Flam & Klere, 2015). Through interviewing the individual, the researcher might also evoke emotion by means of posing questions that are specifically designed to allow the person to think about their emotion. Passion towards online gaming can be a fundamental emotion that drives a person to partake in this activity. Allowing the participant to explore their own emotions can bring forth

valuable insight into why online gaming has become a part of their daily life (Fuster, et al. 2014; Jacobsen, 2009).

Another aspect of researching emotion, that can be problematic, is the fact that people often tend to lie about what they are feeling or might not be expressing their emotions accurately. Even within different cultures, emotions are expressed uniquely (Czarniawska, 2015, as cited in Flam & Kleres, 2015; Kendall, 2011). South Africa offers a wide range of different cultures and it is important to carefully investigate the accounts given by each participant. Therefore, the way in which emotions are expressed is of key interest in this study. The only way how people can give account of their emotions and experiences is through language. Exploring the language and how people speak about emotions is therefore important.

Emotions are social constructs made through socialisation. In other words, we learn what an emotion is through observing and interacting with others (Kendall, 2011; Weiten, 2010). Through conversation, we learn the emotions of what others might experience. Therefore, in a way, the emotions we experience are forms of judgement we make towards an event or person. An emotion is a form of reaction we experience and it influences how we perceive and experience our daily lives (Czarniawska, 2015, as cited in Flam & Kleser, 2015).

Emotions can be seen as bodily experiences as well. When a person finds pleasure or excitement in an activity, it is an authentic experience of emotion the person feels (Czarniawska, 2015, as cited in Flam & Kleser, 2015). With regards to online gaming, a person can experience a lot of pleasure and have a genuine emotional experience. Therefore, when exploring the lived experiences of online gamers, the focus should also include expressions of emotion experienced by the player. It is through seeking an understanding of the emotion that the narrative can become clearer as well. The narratives that the participants offer can describe their emotional states to better understand the phenomenon.

1.8. Reflexive research

There are two basic characteristics of reflexive research. The first characteristic is careful interpretation, which means that all references to empirical data are the results of interpretation (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2012). Careful interpretation means that the researcher should be aware that there are relationships that exist between the empirical data gathered and the outside world. In other words, the data gathered through observations, measurement scales, and interviews, that are perceived as empirical facts, cannot be accepted as the only reality (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2012). An important theoretical assumption of phenomenology is that each individual constructs their own reality based on their experience and understanding of their life-world (Inglis & Thorpe, 2012). Therefore, the researcher should be aware, while interpreting the gathered data, that their own life-world can influence how the data is interpreted and perceived. The second characteristic of reflexive research is reflection. This element of reflexive research requires researchers to turn their attention inwards and reflect on the possible problematic nature of interpretations (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2012). The process of research is a reconstruction of the social reality of the participants. Researchers constantly have to be careful and reflect on their interpretations to ensure that their views reconstruct the views of the participant (Ryan, et al. 2007).

Throughout this chapter, the focus has been on qualitative research. However, it should be stated that, for qualitative research to be reflexive, the researcher should not take a stand on the qualitative side of the continuum and ignore facets of quantitative research. Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) states that the relationship between empirical data and theory is of utmost importance (Inglis & Thorpe, 2012). For Bourdieu, research should be conducted in an integrated way that incorporates both the fundamental components of qualitative and quantitative research (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). In other words, in social research, there should be a combination of objectivism and subjectivism. How researchers can accomplish this task is through the use of a double reading. This entails that the researcher takes on two sets of lenses to look at the research problem at hand. Firstly, all social facts, as Durkheim would state it, have to be gathered (Kendall, 2011); this would be known as the objectivist point of view of the double reading. This takes up a structuralistic approach in the

sense that the phenomenon is materially observed and measured as much as possible, which Bourdieu refers to as focusing on *social physics* (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). It is important to “know what we must know” in the first place before we can move to the “why?” question (Maree, 2013: 51). The prevalence of the phenomena should be established before the second reading can take place (Stangor, 2015). The second reading refers to the subjectivist point of view in the double reading, which is referred to as *social phenomenology*. Through this lens the researcher is made aware of the idea that society is also the product of the decisions, actions, and cognitions of individuals within it (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). When combining the two approaches of structuralist thinking and subjectivist/constructivist thinking, the result is a social praxeology.

Social praxeology allows the researcher to create knowledge which is exchangeable between the objective and subjective views of social research, in order to create a combination of two separate, but related, realities (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). It is objective in the sense that subjective interpretations are set aside to firstly observe the tangible institutions of society. It also refers to measuring what can be measured (Wacquant, 1992). With this part, it can be compared to the first reading where the researcher searches for the observable facts first, in order to gain a wide view of the phenomenon. After objective clarifications are made as to how subjective interpretations can be influenced, the researcher now deeply investigates the everyday experiences of individuals to gain insight into their life-worlds. Relating this approach to online gaming, I first have to investigate the prevalence of online gaming on an international and national level to objectively view the phenomenon. When the whole of the phenomenon is viewed, then the hermeneutic circle can begin where I start to focus on the parts of online gaming that take place on an individual and subjective level, which can be referred to as the second reading (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Maree, 2013). During the second reading, the narratives of the online gamers are explored to gain more insight into their lived experiences.

Chapter 2: Literature review

This chapter seeks to create a context that enables the reader to understand current insights into the phenomenon of online gaming. Firstly, to understand what online gaming means to an individual and how it can become a large part of a person's daily life, one must investigate what video games are and how the path is taken from video games towards online games, as well as how this activity creates a space that allows groups to be formed in virtual communities.

After conceptualising what online gaming is, several key aspects are introduced and elaborated on. Due to the nature of the phenomenon, it is important to focus on how a social identity is created and impacted, because a person enters a virtual reality. Consequently, a person invests a lot of time and effort into this part of their life and it is thus necessary to explore the motivations that drive individuals to play games and become a part of online communities.

Exploration of virtual communities takes place further into the chapter through establishing what these communities are, how they are created, and what other communities outside of gaming contexts can exist for players. It is through this section that attention is given to the social construction of reality, in order to understand how a player can be immersed into gaming. In conjunction with understanding how communities are an essential part of the experience of players, the research illuminates how a sense of belonging is achieved and to what extent personality is a contributing factor.

Lastly, focus is given to the emergence of a gaming culture and more insight is achieved into the experiences of online gamers, i.e. escaping reality, gender swapping, stereotyping, and the role of morality in video games.

2.1. Video games

Video games offer us an immersive experience unlike any other form of media. If we look at video games through a sociological perspective we, can view video games as products of our society that represent a different dimension of our society, as well as emphasising the possibilities of the changes that can be made to society (Culig, et al.

2013; Kendall, 2011). Video games cannot be seen as merely entertainment for children, since this form of media is not only distinct from other forms of media, but has also become a popular activity amongst adults. Hence sociologists are still in the process of charting this territory theoretically (Boulton & Cremin, 2011; Caratarescu-Petrica, 2015). Gaming has been seen as a recreational or passive leisure activity, but the view is starting to shift towards the perception that games are a more distinctive activity that requires a large amount of agency (Lorentz, et al. 2015).

Defining precisely what a video game is can be a difficult task (Culig, et al. 2013; Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). When an activity can be categorised as an action that takes place in an isolated spot but with specific rules, it describes important aspects of what a game seems to entail (Crawford, 2009). However, other facets that go hand in hand with gaming describe it as an activity that detaches people from the reality of everyday life. It makes people feel safe, although it might be described as a non-productive activity/hobby. The activity can at the same time be seen as enjoyment to the person that partakes in it (Culig, et al. 2013). Subsequently, games entail activities that promote the potential for other forms of expression through story-telling (Boulton & Cremin, 2011).

If an activity showcases, in essence, playfulness combined with rules and organisational issues, it can be considered as a game. Nonetheless, a set definition of what a video game is should be established in order to guide this study. Salen and Zimmerman (2004) looks at eight different definitions from academics to produce a definition of their own. "A game is a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome" (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004: 93). Rules are used to provide structure in the activity, while the quantifiable outcome proposes that games should have goals that can be reached - such as winning or losing. Since there are goals such as winning or losing in a game, an element of artificial conflict arises from it. Throughout this dissertation, video games will subscribe to this definition.

Video games do more than simply provide entertainment for players. Games can foster a community and build friendships that allow trust to be formed in cases where people actively encourage each other (Caratarescu-Petrica, 2015). Video games combine functionality with aesthetics, art and science (Borowiecki & Prieto-Rodriguez,

2015). All of the above-mentioned aspects allow for video games to become a popular activity among people. People enjoy taking part in this action to such an extent that it becomes a part of their daily life and can influence the cultural fabric of the household (Culig, et al. 2013; Lorentz, et al. 2015).

What sets video games aside from other forms of media is its ability to stimulate interaction and bonding between players (Caratarescu-Petrica, 2015). It offers creative ways for the individual to interact with the game through the ways it allows players to make choices that can generate different outcomes in substantial ways (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). With such capabilities, video gaming has grown to become one of the most popular forms of media (Boulton & Cremin, 2011; Clarke, 2013; Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). Clarke (2013) states that the majority of people that play video games fall between the ages of 18 – 50, and that the population of gamers mostly consists of males. Yet, the gender gap between females and males that play video games is starting to become narrower (Clarke, 2013). In this regard, the general notion that video games are aimed at younger children can be seen as false and that a much larger variety of people engage in video gaming. There are various reasons as to why video games have become such a popular form of media and entertainment. As mentioned, video games allow the individual to interact with the game through making choices. The player is the agent that initiates actions within the game (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). Without the actions of the player, the game cannot progress. Consequently, the choices and actions of the player delivers meaningful outcomes, making the video game a vastly more interactive form of media.

Over time, video games have evolved to allow the individual to do much more. One primary aim of modern video games is to immerse the player into the game in such a way that the player should feel that the game represents reality (Weaver & Lewis, 2012). Immersing the player in the games allows the player to be transported to another world, where the player loses focus on the outside world and gives their full attention to what is happening in the game (Culig, et al. 2013). The player focuses on the game intensely and enjoys it to such an extent that they forget about the outside world in a figurative way. For this immersion to take place the video game should not remind the players that they are in a fake (virtual) environment, because the players consciously choose to play the game. The game design should be done in such a way that the player feels that the game is more intractable in allowing to player to make an

impact within the game environment, and in turn the immersion will come naturally (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). The game is made real when the game allows the player to become involved in the narrative and identify with the in-game characters, much like movies or books (Weaver & Lewis, 2012). Unlike movies and books, however, video games allow the individual to become interactive with the environment and the game's characters (Clarke, 2013). The player chooses the setting where they want to go, with whom they wish to interact, and whether or not to accept objectives or challenges. Most video games, in spite of the freedom that they can provide, have linear approaches. In other words, there is only one objective or road to take for the story to progress. Still, the ways in which players complete these objectives or how the road is taken, is entirely up to the player (Clarke, 2013). Therefore, the experience of video games can be highly unique for each individual player.

Another way for video games to immerse players into the game is through the use of morality to guide the choices the players have to make within the game (Weaver & Lewis, 2012). When the player is given an option that the person really has to think about, it makes the experience feel more real. The consequences of our choices can similarly help with immersing ourselves in the game. If the video game can achieve the goal of allowing players to view the characters in the game as social entities and not just as objects, then morality plays a large role in guiding the decisions the player makes. A study done on the effects of different opponents faced within the game offers insight as to how characters are seen as social entities (Lin, 2011). Whether the opponents are human characters or monster characters have shown to have an impact on the moral emotions of the player. Players are more inclined to fight against monster characters than human characters, and feel less guilt fighting against the monster characters (Lin, 2011). Human characters within the game are portrayed as real-life characters with their own narratives in games, which makes it difficult for most players to take aggressive actions towards them (Lin, 2011; Weaver & Lewis, 2012). However, game developers overwrite this dilemma by casting the role of antagonist on the opponents/enemies, and the player is usually portrayed as the protagonist (Clarke, 2013; Weaver & Lewis, 2012). Therefore, the player feels as if they are doing good and making the right moral choices. The influence of morality will be further discussed in a separate section of the chapter.

There are many benefits to playing video games that have contributed to the increase of their popularity. According to a study done on the benefits of playing video games, there are many similarities between traditional games (such as chess and other board games) and video games (Granic, et al. 2013). The similarities are that both types of games include competitive and cooperative objectives, players are immersed in make-believe worlds in which they can work through emotions, and both types of games give a sense of satisfaction and pride when difficult goals are achieved. The study continues by stating that more individuals are moving towards online games and that it allows the players to socially interact with friends, families, and even complete strangers (Granic, et al. 2013).

In this dissertation, the focus will be on video games that are played online and that allow the player to interact with other players. Players are immersed in these "pretend"/make-believe worlds and make these worlds a part of their own daily lives. Therefore, the study takes a journey into exploring the experiences of online gaming through interviews with participants. Through the use of the phenomenological approach, the study seeks to gain a better understanding and insight into the concept of online gaming and how individuals experience it (Jacobsen, 2009).

2.2. Online gaming

The internet has allowed people to connect and communicate with each other from all the corners of the world. Traditional video games and games that were played on electronic devices did not require a connection to the internet. However, for video games to have kept its worldwide popularity, it had to evolve and adapt as to incorporate the use of the internet. Today, millions of people are playing video games online and interacting with other players on the internet (Badrinarayanan, Sierra, & Taute, 2014) on various platforms and devices (Borowiecki & Prieto-Rodriguez, 2015). In South Africa, gaming is becoming a popular activity as well - with estimates of the gaming industry earning R1.6 billion in turnover from October 2007 to October 2008, out-earning other media such as movies and music when taken separately (Blyth, 2009). Even though gaming is such a popular activity, there are many South Africans that are not able to enjoy it. Having access to gaming platforms to partake in video games is closely related to the income of the household, and because of the unequal

income between different socio-economic groups in South Africa, it is mostly white households in higher income brackets that are able to actively partake in online gaming (Walton & Pallitt, 2012).

In recent years, video games have made the shift towards massively multiplayer online role-playing games (henceforth, MMORPGs). As the name suggests, MMORPGs are online games, and therefore when this study refers to online games, MMORPGs will be included in the term. MMORPGs "allow a large number of players to access an online game environment simultaneously and interact with one another to achieve the game's objectives symbiotically" (Badrinarayanan, Sierra, & Taute, 2014: 1045). Thousands of players can be involved in these virtual worlds. They exist independently from players, and interactions between other players occur in the world even when the player is not logged into the game (Billieux, et al. 2013). In other words, it is as if there is an on-going world with daily interactions and events that occur whether the player is present to experience them or not.

In MMORPGs, the creation of an avatar is vital for the player to be immersed into the virtual environment. Most online games require players to create their own character with various characteristics such as gender, race, and unique physical appearances that together portray the player's avatar (Billieux, et al. 2013). In the case of MMORPGs, the player creates a central avatar that "acts as a shell the player steps into when they play and it becomes their embodiment in the virtual game environment" (De Byl, 2015: 10). How the avatar looks like is entirely up to the players themselves, because there are no limitations. A young male can portray himself as an older female and vice versa. This phenomenon is known as gender swapping and will be discussed at a later stage in the chapter. The player can choose to be a different race or just to make a few alterations to the avatar. With this much leeway in the possibilities of character creation, it is important to focus on the concept of social identity that can exist in MMORPGs.

2.3. Social identity in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs)

In MMORPGs, the virtual environment is created to represent a community that allows its members to develop affective bonds with each other and to express a sense of

belonging towards each other (Gabbiadini, et al. 2014). The player creates their avatar to enter the virtual world and interact with other players. These interactions can lead to the establishment of relationships between players (Billieux, et al. 2013). Over time, groups are formed that consist of players that have made bonds with each other, whether it is with real-life friends, or friends made within the game. Members of these groups share common interests in completion of certain objectives and are loyal towards each other (Badrinarayanan, Sierra, & Taute, 2014).

MMORPGs foster environments for players to work together to complete difficult objectives that would be impossible on their own (Gabbiadini, et al. 2014). Therefore, there is a clear goal within MMORPGs for players to join together and form these bonds. However, in certain games, groups are required to face each other to complete other in-game objectives. These conflict situations require groups to plan and work together in order to win. It caters for the competitive needs of the players and strengthens the relationships between players (Granic, et al. 2013). All these factors contribute to the development of new forms of social identity within online games and even influence the player's social identity outside the virtual world (Badrinarayanan, Sierra, & Taute, 2014).

“Social identity theory posits that individuals define their self-concept through associations with social referents such as ethnicities, work groups, and organizations. That is, to enhance their self-esteem and define their position in their environment, individuals classify themselves into various categories representing social referents through an assimilation of prototypical characteristics associated with such categories and its members.” (Badrinarayanan, Sierra, & Martin, 2015: 1046)

As mentioned, the virtual worlds of MMORPGs continue to function without the need of the player to be logged on and to enter the virtual world; other players can continue to play the game. In this sense, the player's friends can continue to play the game without them (Billieux, et al. 2013). Therefore, the virtual world of the game encourages the player to uphold contact and interaction with the other players to keep their relationships strong. For the player, these friendships made in-game are viewed to be as real, strong, and supportive as any real-life friendship (Gabbiadini, et al. 2014). As the relationships develop between players, their social identity is also influenced. Over time, the more time spend with each other, the more you learn certain characteristics from each other. Members of the group tend to adopt each other's

traits, biases, emotions, and behaviours the more time they spend with each other (Gabbiadini, et al. 2014).

MMORPGs offer the player a safe environment that allows them to remain in control of their choices. When the player feels safe, they are more likely to explore their values and beliefs (Code & Zaparyniuk, 2010). Therefore, the social identity of the player can develop if the environment is without judgement or more controllable by the player. In MMORPGs, when the group achieve success, the positive effects trickle down to each player and their self-esteem is also influenced in a positive way (Gabbiadini, et al. 2014). In other words, the satisfaction experienced in the game influences the player's social identity and allows them to experience positive emotions towards the group. This in turn strengthens the bond between group members.

At the beginning of the individual's journey into online gaming, they might not know any of the other players. There is a sense of uncertainty within the person and with this uncertainty comes a need to identify with other players in the game. From the start of the game, players are uncertain about what is expected of them, and how to behave. Therefore, they identify more strongly with the group within the game to understand the objective of the game (Gabbiadini, et al. 2014). The uncertainty factor drives the new player to adopt the traits and behaviours of the online community.

A concept of "optimal identity" arises, where the player wishes to be included into the online community and not be rejected. Yet, there is also an opposing need to be distinctive from other players and to stand out (Gabbiadini, et al. 2014). A video game player wants to achieve goals and complete objectives within the game, and be seen as a player that is good. However, MMORPGs shift this notion to group identities, where people feel they need to be seen more as a group. The group as a whole wish to achieve a sense of accomplishment in the game and to stand out from other groups. In such a way, the social identity of the players is influenced and this boosts in their self-esteem; they are filled with pride over their accomplishments (Gabbiadini, et al. 2014; Lin, 2011)

The length of time that the player is active in the game is also a factor that influences the social identity of the person. The period of time the player is involved with the game can determine whether they identify more with the group or not. The longer the player is a part of a larger group, the less the player shows favouritism towards their own

group (Gabbiadini, et al. 2014). After a while, the player realises that the function of the other groups is to incite conflict and allow the game to develop. The player no longer sees other groups as the opposition, because the longer the player is involved with the game, the greater their chances are to have experienced what it is like to be a part of the other group.

There are many factors that influence the development of social identity, inter alia uncertainty of the game's expectations, the need to belong to the group, and social distinctiveness. However, there is a need to explore the experiences of how the individual's social identity has changed over time because of their activeness in the game. The aim, therefore, of this study, is to explore, through the views of the participants, how their social identity has changed and how it is influenced by online gaming.

2.4. Driving forces of online gaming

2.4.1. Motivation and passion for online gaming

It is important to understand why gamers in general are interested in playing video games, whether it is online or offline. The general viewpoint towards video gaming is that it is seen as a leisure activity that people play as a hobby, an activity that can be considered as trivial entertainment for children, or to escape reality (Billieux, et al. 2013; Caratarescu-Petrica, 2015). Playing video games to escape reality and to relax is a valid reason why people play video games. Nevertheless, it is only partially true, and there are several other motivations and reasons as to why people play video games.

According to a study done on the relationship between emotional passion (having intense joy and interest in an activity) and online video games, there are many different motivations other than escaping reality, as to why individuals are investing time in playing video games (Fuster, et al. 2014). Firstly, people play online video games to socialise with others, to gain achievement, or to immerse into an alternative world. Motivations can also be different from game to game and how the game is designed can influence the motivations to play it. When a game provides enriching fantasy, well designed narratives for characters, clear tasks and goals, and allowing the player to

feel in control of the virtual world, it can motivate the player to become more involved or even passionate about the game (Turkay & Adinolf, 2015).

Socialising with other players can be one of the primary motives that drives a person to play online games. Thousands of players are able to log onto the same server (virtual environment), with hundreds of players being able to interact with each other and strive towards a shared objective in MMORPGs (Badrinarayanan, Sierra, & Martin, 2015). For many players, this is an experience that cannot be found in other types of offline video games, and is part of the main reason why MMORPGs have grown in popularity. With so many people in the same environment, players feel excited to meet new people over the internet (Caratarescu-Petrica, 2015). Within these environments, people find that it can be a space to bond and learn from each other while creating memorial experiences.

Other motivations for players to indulge in online gaming is to engage their competitive nature, coping with stress, development of skills (leadership skills, communications skills, etc.), fantasy, and recreation (Fuster, et al. 2014). Many games offer the player an experience of fantasy that stretches the imagination of the player. Similar to books and movies, video games allow the user to experience events and stories that cannot be found in reality. However, video games can offer the users more by allowing them to interact with the virtual environment through controlling an avatar, making it an immersive experience unique to video gaming (Granic, et al. 2013). Recreation, as a motive, entails how video games allow the players to relive some of their favourite childhood memories or to experience the fantasy world that was first created in certain books or movies (Fuster, et al. 2014). An example of a popular book that has been recreated for people to experience in more visual and pleasurable ways is J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lords of the Rings* (Billieux, et al. 2013). The popular MMORPG *World of Warcraft* is set in an environment very similar to the environment of *The Lord of the Rings*. It allows players to experience what it would be like to be placed in such a fantasy environment that they previously only viewed from the outside in books and movies. Games allow the player more freedom by providing the players the option to customise their experiences (Turkay & Adinolf, 2015). By allowing players to shape their experiences they feel more autonomy and satisfaction which motivates them to come back and play the game more.

Lastly, there is a broad category that divides motives for playing online games into intrapersonal and interpersonal motives (Fuster, et al. 2014). As mentioned, socialisation is a interpersonal motive that allows players to make friends and provide mutual support for each other while playing online. Furthermore, under intrapersonal motives, the following factors are identified as motives for playing online games: exploration, achievement, and dissociation (Fuster, et al. 2014). Exploration is concerned with how the player wishes to discover the whole of the virtual environment and to be immersed in the lore and mythology of the game. Most MMORPGs offer a variety of adventures for players to embark on (Martoncik & Loksa, 2016). Achievement focuses on the desire of players to complete difficult in-game goals and receive a sense of satisfaction upon completing most of the game's objectives (Badrinarayanan, Sierra, & Martin, 2015; Fuster, et al. 2014). The last intrapersonal motive for playing online games concur with the general viewpoint that video games offer an escape from reality. When a person is deeply focused on a game and seems to forget the outside world, the player can become dissociated from the world. Dissociation allows the player to avoid and escape reality while playing the game and helping with coping with daily stresses or negative emotions (Billieux, et al. 2014; Fuster, et al. 2014).

Moving towards the concept of passion is important, because people tend to spend more time on activities they are passionate about and find interesting (Baumeister & Bushman, 2011). For some individuals, online gaming has become an important part of their daily lives and they tend to spend many hours playing games. A theoretical model of passion aims to explain why gamers are inclined to invest their time in online gaming. "The Dualistic Model of Passion is a new attempt to explain how individuals experience [an] inclination toward an activity in which they invest time and energy." (Fuster, et al. 2014: 293).

According to this model, there are two types of passion an individual displays when they are involved with an activity, namely harmonious passion and obsessive passion (Fuster, et al. 2014). The two types of passion (harmonious and obsessive) contribute to the experiences achieved in online gaming (Fuster, et al. 2014). Harmonious passion refers to how the player voluntarily engages in online gaming and can be contributed to the enjoyment players experience after playing, and wanting to play more. On the other hand, obsessive passion refers to the uncontrollable urge players

feel to play games, and is associated with the time spent on playing and the tension experienced in games when players are unable to complete difficult objectives. With regards to this study, the researcher could explore how the participants identify with each passion, if these types of passions do influence them, and if they feel that there are differences between these types of passion or if there are other unexplained factors in passion towards online gaming.

The two types of passions are similar in that these passions refer to the way an individual is engaged in an activity they like and/or love. Both types of passion explain that the individual is devoted towards the activity and spends a lot of time and energy on the activity. In a way, the activity becomes a part of the individual's identification process (Fuster, et al. 2014). The argument can be made that passion is an important factor in the development of social identity as well. The player spends a considerable amount of time with the group, because they share the same passion towards the game. Therefore, the player identifies more with the group and makes it a part of their social identity (Badrinarayanan, Sierra, & Martin, 2015; Billieux, et al. 2013; Fuster, et al. 2014).

It is important to note that this study does not wish to investigate how passion influences the behaviour of online gamers or how passion influences the time and energy spent on online gaming. The phenomenological paradigm explores the phenomenon through the viewpoint of the participant and seeks to gain insight as to how the phenomenon is experienced (Jacobsen, 2009). In regards to this study, the aim is to explore how gamers experience passion for online gaming. Passion is a powerful emotion that people are not always aware of and people can unconsciously be passionate about something (Baumeister & Bushman, 2011). The aim of the study is, therefore, to uncover the narrative of the participants with regards to how they explain their passion for online gaming: how does the passion towards gaming affect them or make them feel? The research also wants to explore their own viewpoints towards passion for online gaming.

2.4.2. Socialisation as driving force for online gaming

It is established that a perception exists of video gaming in general as a leisure activity (Billieux, et al. 2013). In past years, however, the perception has been that gaming is

done in isolation (Hickerson & Mowen, 2013). When video games started to offer online experiences for players, its popularity grew and, in turn, socialisation became a crucial part of the online gaming experience. Kendall (2011: 104) defines socialisation as a process of social interaction that continues throughout the life of an individual. This process allows individuals to achieve self-identity along with the necessary skills to survive in society. Kendall continues by stating that socialisation is essential in order for individuals to learn how the members of the society think, talk, and act.

Today, online games create their own societies that can be seen as communities. Socialisation plays a role in whether or not these communities flourish. It keeps the society stable and establishes a structure for the members to use and offer social support to each other (Kendall, 2011). Therefore, players are motivated to partake in online gaming, because it offers them the opportunity to experience social interaction (Hickerson & Mowen, 2013). Online games offer a level of social bonding that provides a positive social outcome. Socialisation can therefore be seen as a factor that influences the social and self-identity of the player. Players who are new to a game require help from other players to learn how to "survive" in this new environment. By adapting to the established habits of the game community, a new player forms a new identity in the process.

Socialisation can help players that have formed similar identities to establish social bonds with each other. Within the gaming environment, players create clans or guilds in order to offer social support for one another (Lundmark, 2015). Therefore, it is important to explore the perceptions that players have towards socialisation and to investigate whether online gamers see socialisation as an important factor and a necessity for the online experience.

2.5. Exploring online communities and the role of social construction of reality

2.5.1. Online gaming communities

Gaming provides an opportunity for players to create their own gaming community. Throughout the literature review, online communities and MMORPG communities have been described as environments where a large amount of players can log in through the internet in order to interact, communicate and play with each other (Billieux, et al. 2013; Hou, et al. 2011). Moreover, the community is formed through

players that bond with each other through playing, as well as creating a practice where players share a passion for gaming and learn to become better at this activity through their interactions (Caratarescu-Petrica, 2015). Within this section, the focus will be more on the communities that are created in and outside of online games.

When a player enters the game for the first time, all players start as novices, and are on an equal level (Badrinarayanan, Sierra, & Taute, 2014). To progress further in the game, the player needs to complete in-game objectives to gain experience. Each game offers different types of objectives according to the story of the game. Upon completing these objectives, the player gains experience points to spend on their character and, with this experience, the player can mold their avatar into a certain direction of skillsets. Most MMORPGs offer a vast amount of skills. A player can learn to become a strong warrior, a powerful mage, or a dexterious archer. However, to master all of the skills at the same time is not possible (because it takes a lot of time and certain games only allow you to master a few capabilities) and hence the player is required to choose a direction of speciality (Badrinarayanan, Sierra, & Martin, 2015). Accordingly, each player's avatar can be uniquely skilled and offers the factor of distinctiveness most players desire (Gabbadini, et al. 2014). In turn, because of the uniqueness of skillsets each player possesses, players are encouraged to work together on difficult objectives. Working together allows the group to be more balanced. Each player consequently feels that he/she can make a contribution towards to group and that the group/community is strengthened through the casting of roles on each player (Badrinarayanan, Sierra, & Taute, 2014).

MMORPG communities are maintained and promoted not only through the immersive environments the game developers create, but also through the high quality of social contact (Badrinarayanan, Sierra, & Taute, 2014). Communication is a central aspect in online gaming for players. Effective communication leads to better and faster completion of objectives and supports the creation of in-game friendships that might evolve to real-life friendships (Badrinarayanan, Sierra, & Taute, 2014; Hou, et al. 2011). Players can communicate through text messaging with each other during the game, using gestures available in the game itself, or communicate verbally through microphone headsets. Using microphones to talk to each other offers a kind of face-to-face experience in the game and furthers the immersion into the game (Granic, et al. 2013). In this study it is important to explore the experiences of the participants with

regard to how they communicate with their friends during online playing sessions, and the affects of immediate communication that is available in online gaming.

2.5.2. Social construction of reality in online gaming

The general aim of most video games is to immerse the player into the virtual environment in such a way that the player accepts the events to be true in the game, and to create a sense of a virtual reality (Badrinarayanan, Sierra, & Martin, 2015; Hou, et al. 2011). The more flexibility is given to the player and the more the player experiences freedom in the game, the more the virtual world is felt as a reality that can be compared to a real-life experience (Billieux, et al. 2013; Latorre, 2015).

Berger and Luckmann's argument that reality is the product of human consciousness is an important insight to consider when dealing with "virtual worlds/realities" (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2012; Berger & Luckmann, 1991). When actions are repeated over time, they become habits that people start to believe to be part of the community (Inglis & Thorpe, 2012; Jacobsen, 2009). It is, therefore, necessary to view the virtual communities as real realities as seen through the eyes of the player, because of the habits and typifications that are formed in the virtual worlds (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2012).

The argument can be made that, when video games are viewed as artificial environments with no real events actually occurring, all interactions within the game that happen between players are not real as well (Latorre, 2015). However, for the players themselves, these interactions are as real as the interactions that occur in real-life. In other words, even though the interactions take place online, they are still between real people, making them real as well. Being a part of events and engaging with friends is what makes virtual reality an actual reality (Jacobsen, 2009; Latorre, 2015). Therefore, the aim of this study is to explore the online communities as real communities and to gain insight into how they are viewed from the participants' eyes.

2.5.3. Other online communities

In MMORPGs, there are various communities that allow the players to connect with each other outside of the game itself. Examples of these communities are YouTube

gaming channels and Facebook groups. YouTube has become a popular medium for players to be immersed into any form of video gaming and online gaming. One feature that has helped in this rise of popularity is "Let's Play" videos (Glas, 2015). Let's Play videos are videos that are uploaded onto YouTube that showcases a YouTuber playing the game. The YouTuber adds flavour into the play sessions by making use of humourous commentary on occurrences in the game. Therefore, it is essential that the YouTuber is a person that can be entertaining and creative. These forms of Let's Play videos are very successful with over millions of people tuning in to watch their favourite YouTuber play a popular game (Glas, 2015).

Communities are created in the form of a following or fan base being established that subscribe to the YouTuber's channel. An unlimited number of people can subscribe to a channel with some of the most popular channels having millions of people following them (Glas, 2015). These subscribers are able to communicate with each other through the commenting system that YouTube has to offer. Each video offers a space to allow a person to comment about anything, and afterwards the YouTuber and/or other people respond to that comment. Thus, interaction between members of the community is possible. People communicate with each other to share knowledge about the game with each other and to help people that are struggling with the game (Glas, 2015). Consequently, YouTube communities can be found that are related to MMORPGs. MMORPGs often offer difficult objectives for players that they might not be able to complete with their friends (Badrinarayanan, Sierra, & Taute, 2014; Billieux, et al. 2013). These players can then search YouTube for solutions on completing these objectives by viewing videos that show how to complete these objectives or by asking other subscribers in the comment sections (Glas, 2015). Therefore, it is important to investigate how YouTube has an influence on the experiences of online gamers and how it can be seen as a online community for the participants.

Facebook can also be seen as an online community that gamers can be involved in. People on Facebook can become a part of social groups to maintain contact with other people that are geographically distant from them (Akin & Akin, 2015; Tazghini & Siedlecki, 2013). In other words, online gamers can create Facebook groups with their MMORPGs friends to form communities outside of the game (Akin & Akin, 2015; Badrinarayanan, Sierra, & Taute, 2014). As mentioned, the virtual worlds of MMORPGs continue to function without the need for players to be personally logged

on (Billieux, et al. 2013). With this in mind, players can use Facebook to remain in contact with each other without having to first log into the game. Therefore, Facebook eases the task of making arrangements between players, and makes it possible for players to share their experiences in the group (Akin & Akin, 2015; Dean & Laidler, 2014).

Youtube and Facebook can be seen as a part of the daily lives of the gamers if they allow it to be, whether it be for connecting with other people, or to gain information, or to share experiences with friends (Akin & Akin, 2015; Glas, 2015; Jacobsen, 2009). While exploring the online communities of MMORPGs is one of the main focuses of this study, it is important not to exclude real world communities that can influence gamers as well.

2.6. Sense of belonging to online gaming communities

A sense of belonging is complex and multidimensional in nature. It is dynamic in the sense that it is influenced by the context it is found in and has contributing internal and external factors (Cartmell & Bond, 2015). A sense of belonging can be conceptualised as feeling a connectedness with the community (Carpiano & Hystad, 2011). Furthermore, a sense of belonging is experienced when the environment/community is encouraging and supportive to its new and old members (Le, et al. 2016).

Carpiano and Hystad (2011) offer four key components of a sense of belonging that can be used to explain how players achieve a sense of belonging in their online communities. The first component refers to membership in the community. It is the core component and pertains to the feeling of connectedness or feeling of a sense of personal relatedness. In online games and MMORPGs, communities are referred to as guilds or clans, where players identify with the other members as their teammates (Badrinarayanan, Sierra, & Taute, 2014). The second component is influence (Carpiano & Hystad, 2011). For individuals to feel that they are a part of the community they should feel that their actions matter and makes a difference in the community. As mentioned, each player becomes more distinctive as the game develops. The player increases his/her skillset in such a way that it becomes a necessary part of the team and that the other people need that person in order to succeed (Gabbiadini, et al.

2014). Hence, the player influences the dynamics of the community and feels that their contributions would make a difference in the game (Carpiano & Hystad, 2011).

The third component in experiencing a sense of belonging is integration and fulfillment of needs. In order for players to feel they are a part of the community, they should be considered as valuable members of the team. Additionally, if the player has any needs, the community should strive to fulfil these needs. This will lead to the player feeling a sense of personal relatedness towards the community. Throughout MMORPGs, members tend to help each other through sharing knowledge with new members on how to do things. Members share in-game objects referred to items that which are necessary to progress in the game, and the main way to fulfill needs is through helping each other to complete objectives where teamwork is required (Badrinarayanan, Sierra, & Taute, 2014; Billieux, et al. 2013). The last component of sense of belonging is sharing of emotional connections (Carpiano & Hystad, 2011). This component relates to how members are committed towards each other and it is believed that members share history, common places, and similar experiences.

These four components can be used to explore how online gamers experience a sense of belonging to online communities. With regards to this study, these four components can be used to guide the participants to explore their own experiences of belonging, both past and present. These four components will hopefully help with identifying themes within the study relating to how gamers experience a sense of belonging in online communities.

2.6.1. View of personality

Personality can be seen as the “unique, relatively enduring internal and external aspects of a person’s character that influence behaviour in different situations” (Schultz & Schultz, 2013: 8). Personality can be used to describe a person and encompasses all characteristics of that person. It is necessary to understand the role of personality when exploring how people feel a sense of belonging in online communities and exploring how personality has an influence when approaching these communities. An individual’s personality determines how they view other people and how that person wants to be seen. It also guides how a person interacts with other people - whether it be in person or in the virtual world (Schultz & Schultz, 2013).

The view of personality as a facet of human nature that explains people's emotions, cognitive trends and characteristics is mostly associated with psychology. However, sociology also strives to understand personality and the impact it has on society. Sociologists view personality in how it relates to the status the person has in the larger group. In other words, personality can be seen as how an individual perceives their role as a member of the group (Kendall, 2011). The way other people see us can have an influence on our personality. Sigmund Freud had a large influence on the way modern sociologists view personality. Freud argued that the driving force of a person's behaviour comes from the superego part of the personality, and that this aspect of the personality is derived from cultural and parental values (Meisenhelder, 2006). With this notion, it can be understood that society plays a role in how a person interacts with other people. Durkheim supports this point through stating that ideas, sentiments, and beliefs are products of the society that has power over the individual (Seigel, 1987). According to Durkheim, a part of the personality does not come from what distinguishes each individual, but rather from what we have in common (Seigel, 1987: 485).

Max Weber, on the other hand, viewed personality differently. He used personality to refer to a person as a whole, rather than aspects that guide behaviour (Portis, 1978). Weber argued that, to understand why certain phenomena occur, it is important to understand the goals or values that motivate the person in that situation (Portis, 1978: 113). Clearly, personality is a complex issue that has different ways to be viewed. With regards to this study, it is important to include a wide scope of aspects of how personality influences online gamers. Personality will be broached with the participants and will be explored from their point of view; how it influences their experience with online gaming in general.

2.6.2. Personality and online gaming

Passion and socialisation have already been linked as motivations to play online games. However, personality also relates to the motivation of a person to play. Individuals' personalities help them to fulfil their needs. For instance, a person that is more extroverted and open to new experiences will be more active in online games and approach new players accordingly (Park & Lee, 2012). On the other hand,

research suggests that personality cannot be used to predict online gaming behaviour (Park, Song, & Teng, 2011: 749). Certain individuals struggle with social interaction and experience a sense of anxiety as a part of their personality (Cole & Hooley, 2013). These gamers tend to avoid social interactions and might experience a lower sense of belonging in online gaming communities.

A study done on gaming personality and dynamics proposes that there are four unique types of gaming personality types that motivate different types of engagements with the game and with other players (Tu, et al. 2015). The four types of gaming personalities are achiever, explorer, socialiser and killer - each with its own motivation to play (Tu, et al. 2015: 159).

- Achiever – this type of player is motivated by becoming a skilful player and improving their capabilities as much as possible. Completing challenging goals can be linked to this type of personality (Clarke, 2013).
- Explorer – players that fall under this category feel the need to be in control of the game by discovering all that the game has to offer and obtaining the rewards for their efforts.
- Socialiser – certain people are motivated to play online games to connect with other gamers and strive for the sense of relatedness that online communities can offer them.
- Killer – this type of personality describes players that are competitive in nature and seek to dominate other players.

This study seeks to understand the role of personality and how it influences the online gamer, whether it be with merely the gaming experience or whether the player seeks to establish a sense of belonging with other players in online communities.

2.7. Online gaming culture

Since the rise of the internet, many people have become more connected across the world. Instant accessibility to information and communication has brought on a sense of globalisation of cultures (Haigh, Russel, Andrew, & Dutton, 2015; Samovar, Porter, & McDaniel, 2010: 2). Culture helps members of society to learn valuable knowledge that helps each individual to survive and be able to adapt to the environment (Samovar, Porter, & McDaniel, 2010: 23). This entails, in essence, the passing of

common knowledge onto members of the group to ease communication and to help form interpersonal relationships (Kendall, 2011: 73). When the shift from video games to online gaming occurred, the need for a online gaming culture arised as well. Video games “exhibit unprecedented potential for cultural creation in the form of visual arts, story telling or audio soundscape” (Borowiecki & Prieto-Rodriquez, 2015: 16). Culture between gamers helps them to understand each other and eases the process of integration for new players into the gaming world. In other words, having shared knowledge of games not only helps new people get into gaming, but helps people to form friendships through shared experiences (Carpiano & Hystad, 2011; Kendall, 2011). Because video games offer interactibility, it provides a culture that can be loftier than other forms of media (Borowiecki & Prieto-Rodriquez, 2015).

South Africa offers a rich multicultural environment with many unique individuals, each with their own subjective interpretations of a situation (Fetvadjiev, et al. 2015). Most gaming companies are situated outside of South Africa. Therefore, the games that people play and grow up with are from other cultures across the world. When individuals allow games to become a part of their life and to have an influence on their culture, there is another form of globalisation happening. A form of “glocalisation” starts to occur where the unique cultures of South Africa start to combine with international cultures to form a part of their habitus (Jacobsen, 2009; Jin, 2011). The need to understand how online gaming cultures make an impact on the online gamers of South Africa is of interest in this study. Whether gaming culture helps to form international relationships or to catalyse a sense of connectedness is an area that needs further exploration in the South African context.

2.8. Experiences of online gamers and other influences of online gaming

2.8.1. The experience of escaping reality

One of the motivations for playing MMORPGs, which continually stands out, is to escape reality. Online gamers choose to play online games to escape the stress and demands of the real world (Clancy, et al. 2015). Being absorbed into a game allows the individual to lose focus of the outside world, forgetting everyday life and the issues that come with it. Another aspect that links with this motivation is that online gamers experience less loneliness and anxiety while they play games (Martoncik & Loksa,

2016). Online gamers, therefore, feel that they need to get away from the real world from time to time. MMORPGs seem to be people's personal preference for escaping the real-world, because, in the world of MMORPGs, they feel like a part of the community and they experience a sense of purpose (Clancy, et al. 2015).

In the online world, players choose to interact with other people that share their interests and experiences. Therefore, the online world can be manipulated in such a way that the player receives the most benefit (Martoncik & Loksa, 2016). Online gamers, then, seem to be living a double life where their real world life is different from their virtual life. Games allow them to take a break from everyday life and reality (Culig, et al. 2013). Whether this may be an accurate representation of why gamers play MMORPGs should be investigated further and this investigation allows participants to explore their perceptions of escaping reality.

2.8.2. Gender swapping in online gaming

In a study conducted about the experiences of online gamers, it has been found that at least half of all the participants in that study has engaged in gender swapping at least once in one of their gameplays (Hussain & Griffiths, 2009). The nature of MMORPGs allows the players the freedom to choose their gender. Therefore, males can play as female characters, and vice versa. Gender swapping can be defined as choosing to create an avatar with a different gender as the player's biological sex (Song & Jung, 2015). Reasons for gender swapping range from plain curiosity, to experimenting with playing as a different gendered character, to avoid approaches/flirting from male players (in this case females play as male characters), and for fun (Hussain & Griffiths, 2009). Although some research may suggest that gender swapping can be seen as a method for portraying one's identity, it can also be seen as a tool for enhancing gameplay (Song & Jung, 2015).

One important aspect to consider in gender swapping cases is to understand what the avatar represents for the player. Whether the player sees the avatar as a representation or extension of themselves, or if the avatar is just seen as a tool to create a character for the game, can determine the role of gender swapping for the player (Song & Jung, 2015). For some players, changing certain aspects of the avatar may indicate the changes they would like to make on themselves in real life. For

instance, males with gender identity issues were found to be more likely to create female characters, and males who were considered to be more feminine were also more likely to play as female characters (Song & Jung, 2015). However, other reasons for players to partake in gender swapping do not necessarily have a deeper or hidden intention. Some males play as female characters because it is aesthetically pleasing to look at the female physique, while other males play as female characters to receive a different experience than their previous play-through of the game where they played as a male character. This can be applied to females as well, where they played as a male character in order to achieve a different experience than when they played as a female character (Song & Jung, 2015).

Another study that investigated gender swapping in online gaming discovered similar reasons to play as the opposite gender. It was found that mostly males participate in gender swapping, and that females did not participate in gender swapping because it made it harder for them to identify with their avatar (Isaksson, 2012). Males played as female characters, because female characters are portrayed more beautifully in the game and the males enjoyed looking at a beautiful character while they played. The study also found a link between maturity of the male and the type of body form of the female character (Isaksson, 2012). The more the female character is sexually portrayed, the more immature the male player appeared to be.

Gender swapping is an interesting phenomenon inside the world of online gaming that is quite unique to this field. Within gaming, it is very easy to experiment with different aspects of reality. To change your sex is as easy as clicking an option. Therefore, reasons for partaking in gender swapping can be different from player to player and it depends on the experience they enjoy. In this dissertation, relating to the experiences of online gaming, there is a need to explore the perceptions of South African gamers towards gender swapping. In the virtual worlds of MMORPGs, gender swapping is accepted as a normal daily occurrence and whether it is accepted in South Africa or not is a feature that needs to gain a better understanding.

2.8.3. Stereotyping and stigmatisation towards gamers

It is clear that people who partake in online gaming have a passion for it (Fuster, et al. 2014) and that they spend a copious amount of time playing games, making it a part

of their lives (Badrinarayanan, Sierra, & Taute, 2014). For people that are not a part of this life-world, it can seem strange and irregular, which can lead to negative assumptions towards online gamers. There are various stereotypes that exist towards gamers and it has led to a form of stigmatisation. This study seeks to explore the affects and experiences of stereotypes and stigmas towards players. Individuals partaking in online gaming might not be aware of current stigmas, or are aware of and can have strong emotions towards them. It is the goal of this study to explore this side of the phenomenon to gain a better understanding as to why stigmas towards gamers exist and how participants feel about these stigmas.

Firstly, a clear definition is required of what stereotyping and stigmatisation is should be focused on, in order to better grasp how it pertains to the study in question. "Stereotyping refers to people's tendency to oversimplify or severely limit our perception of other social groups" (Stewart & Zaaiman, 2015: 143). Stereotyping leads people to make generalisations and assumptions about a specific group, which can be positive or negative. An example of stereotyping towards gamers can be that: "all people who play computer games must be smart" or that "people who spent a lot of time playing video games are bad at sports". Such assumptions narrow how an individual can be seen as a unique being and can lead to negative interpersonal interactions (Sigelman & Rider, 2012). Stigmatisation, on the other hand, can usually be interpreted as a negative perception towards a person or group of people. Stigmatisation refers to a label or a form of a characteristic that is placed on a person (Sigelman & Rider, 2012; Stewart & Zaaiman, 2015). This label then discredits or prevents a person to be fully accepted in a certain situation. This characteristic can be seen as something that is unwanted and unacceptable in terms of the social standards of a particular society (Stewart & Zaaiman, 2015). Within this section, the focus will be on the most contemporary stigmas that exist today towards online gamers and how their daily lives are impacted by these stigmas.

The first stigma that exists towards players, which is known by several people who do not even necessarily subscribe to this stigma, is that people who partake in video games are socially isolated individuals (Khanolkar & McLean, 2012). The general picture that comes to mind when a person thinks of how a gamer looks, is a male with glasses and greasy hair, that still lives with his parents (or in the basement). The assumption that mostly males partake in video gaming is already under question.

Many females have started to play online games, and along with females, many older independent adults play games as well (Badrinarayanan, Sierra, & Martin, 2015; Gabbiadini, et al. 2014). According to Khanolkar and McLean (2012:971) online gamers strongly reject this stigma, and, on the contrary, feel that online gaming has made them more sociable. This seems to correlate with the socialisation aspect of gaming as a motivation for partaking in the activity (Badrinarayanan, Sierra, & Martin, 2015).

Another major stigma that exists and that has been a contemporary topic of debate over the years, is that violent video games can cause violent behaviour (Khanolkar & McLean, 2012; Nauroth, et al. 2014). The media occasionally mentions that a person was involved with violent video games and that this relationship might have led to the occurrence of an incident - whether it be a mass shooting or any other criminal behaviour. Experts state that the violence portrayed in video games are context specific and certain acts might be seen as much more violent than others, depending on how it is depicted (Khanolkar & McLean, 2012). In certain cases, similar actions can be seen as violent and others as non-violent. How it is graphically portrayed, and how it is presented to the player, has an impact. Modern video games give the player a freedom of choice to conduct certain actions or not. Whether the player chooses to conduct violent acts might play a role in his or her behaviour in the future (Nauroth, et al. 2014). However, through the voices of gamers this notion of stigmatisation is very negatively perceived. Players view this stigma as badly researched and that it cannot be generalised towards the whole population of gamers (Nauroth, et al. 2014). The aim of this study is to explore the perceptions of online gamers towards the stigma that states that violent video games cause violent behaviour. Participants' knowledge about other stereotypes will also be explored and their perceptions of stereotypes towards gamers. The study will also seek to explore whether gamers are active in the disproving of stigmas or whether it has become an acceptable part of their daily lives (Berger & Luckmann, 1991).

2.9. Morality and online gaming

Morality can be seen as how an individual is able to see the difference between what is right and what is wrong. Furthermore, morality also focuses on how an individual

acts on what is right and wrong, and whether a sense of pride is experienced when doing the right thing or if a sense of guilt is felt when doing the wrong thing (Sigelman & Rider, 2012: 436). Therefore, morality can be viewed as having an impact on how an individual behaves. However, online gaming offers a unique situation, where the effect of morality is different from how it is in the world outside of the virtual environment. The world of online games is real in the sense of how the individual creates it to be real (Berger & Luckmann, 1991), but the lines between what is right or wrong do not seem all that important anymore. If the game is created for the sole purpose of killing the enemy in an entertaining way, is it then wrong not to kill the enemy? It is necessary to explore how morality impacts the choices of a player in a game and how the execution of moral choices affects the experiences of online gamers. Each video game is different, and while some do not offer a wide range of freedom, others do offer the player a complete experience of freedom of choice. In those games, what is right and what is wrong can become very subjective.

How the individual relates to the avatar they have created in the game can give an indication as to how the morality of the person is portrayed within the game. As mentioned, a player can create a character in MMORPGs that can resemble themselves (Billieux, et al. 2013). However, it is completely up to the person if they want it to resemble themselves or identify with the avatar, and so it can just be an entirely random character. Morality comes into play when the player identifies with the avatar as themselves and wishes to act accordingly. Then the player will project their own morals into the game and act as they would in the real life (Young & Whitty, 2010). The player can then even seek to create an equilibrium between their character in the game and their actions outside the game. In certain cases, how an individual acts within the game can sometimes transfer over to their real world behaviour in the sense of decision-making and problem-solving (Young & Whitty, 2010).

2.10. Conclusion

Video games have become one of the most popular forms of media because they allow the player to interact with the medium and become immersed into another reality (Clarke, 2013; Weaver & Lewis, 2012). Video gaming is now even more popular through the connectedness the internet provides players. Massively multiplayer online

role-playing games (MMORPGs) allow thousands of players to play together in virtual worlds (Badrinarayanan, Sierra, & Taute, 2014; Billieux, et al. 2013). A person can create their own avatar within MMORPGs and, through that, social identity can be influenced. Players control what they portray towards others to be accepted in groups, but also what they want to stand out. Therefore, there is a concept of “optimal identity” that gamers strive for (Gabbiadini, et al. 2014).

Several motivations exist for people to be indulged in online gaming. On the surface people get involved with gaming to relax and have a sense of escaping reality (Billieux, et al. 2013). However, players become very passionate about gaming and have more complex motivations to play games. Main motivations to play include socialising with others, to gain a sense of achievement, and to be immersed into an alternate reality (Badrinarayanan, Sierra, & Martin, 2015). Other motivations also exist, i.e. to engage their competitive nature, coping with stress, development of leadership and communication skills, and fantasy and recreation (Fuster, et al. 2014).

The communities of the online gaming world are also contributing factors to why people allow games to become a part of their daily lives. Social contact and communication with others allows for the creation of friendships and interpersonal growth (Badrinarayanan, Sierra, & Taute, 2014; Granic, Lobel, & Engels, 2013). Essentially, the immersion of online games and communities influence the social construction of reality of players. Every interaction in the game may not be real and have consequences in the world, however, these actions are still a part of the human consciousness and therefore the choices are real for the players themselves (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2012; Berger & Luckmann, 1991; Latorre, 2015).

An end product of the motivations of the players, combined with the immersion and constant social contact, is a sense of belonging between players in online communities. Players need to feel that they are a part of a larger community and that they need to make an impact on these communities (Carpiano & Hystad, 2011). Whether players' needs are met or not is important for them to feel a sense of connectedness. However, personality plays a role in how the person interacts with their environment. If the player is extroverted and open towards new experiences, they will most likely become more involved with online communities (Park & Lee, 2012). A form of culture is then established over time. If a community is safe and inviting, and

passes on valuable information to its members, the culture will thrive (Haigh, et al. 2010). There is currently an international gaming culture. However, each country incorporates its own culture as well, leading to a “glocalisation” of gaming cultures around the world (Jin, 2011).

To conclude this chapter: the current insights and views towards the experiences of gamers were explored. The experience of escaping reality seems to be linked with gamers experiencing less loneliness and anxiety (Martoncik & Loksa, 2016). Gender swapping is also a unique part of the gaming experience. Players sometimes play as characters of the opposite sex in their games. Motivations for partaking in gender swapping seem to differ. Males play as females just to look at the feminine physique, or to allow themselves to explore their identity, where females might play as male characters to avoid the advances of males in the game (Hussain & Griffiths, 2009; Song & Jung, 2015).

There are several stereotypes and stigmas that exist towards gamers today. People tend to see video gamers as socially isolated individuals (Khanolkar & McLean, 2012). Another stigma is that violent video games can cause violent behaviour (Khanolkar & McLean, 2012; Nauroth, et al. 2014). However, as with all stereotypes and stigmas, this is not necessarily true. The study seeks to further investigate which stereotypes gamers are aware of, and how are they impacted on in their everyday life.

Lastly, the area of morals and gaming is explored as well. Many games allow its players the freedom of choice and certain choices can be clearly seen as “good” or “evil”. The choices within the game would have no real consequences in the real world, but morals would still have an impact on the players’ decision-making processes. Players can therefore portray their own morals in game choices or do the complete opposite (Young & Whitty, 2010). The study seeks to gain insight into all of the above-mentioned aspects of online gaming, to establish a clearer understanding of the narrative of gamers. Each individual’s life story is unique and can offer new areas of exploration that current studies have not yet investigated.

Chapter 3: Methodological account

The aim of this chapter is to describe the methodological foundation of my dissertation. The chosen methods and techniques used to achieve the research objectives are discussed. *The narrative study of lives* takes, by its very nature, a qualitative research approach. Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to conceptualise what narrative research is and how it guides the choice of methods used to conduct this study.

In this chapter, my account of the research design process will receive attention. Consequently, the goals, research problem and questions posed to conduct this study, will be explained and justified. Afterwards, focus shifts towards the methods of data collection utilised. In each section of the chapter, the choice of methods is supported with theoretical standpoints. Further, the aim of the chapter is to deliberate the ethical dilemmas of the research project. The process of ethical clearance required by the University of the Free State is discussed and I also describe how this process was dealt with. Lastly, my methodological account moves towards the analytic processes chosen to explore the lived experiences of online gamers. In this section, I reflect on how these processes are utilised, as well as on the steps taken to ensure the quality in this qualitative research study.

3.1. Narrative research

"Narrative research... strives to preserve the complexity of what it means to be human and to locate its observations of people and phenomena in society" (Josselson, 2006, as cited in David, 2010: 254). Hence, narrative research is always interpretive. With this dissertation, my aim is to gain insight into the world of online gamers and to indicate how these individuals experience this world on a day to day basis. It is the stories of the gamers that are interpreted in order to come to an understanding of the meaning which participants attribute to online gaming (Goodson & Gill, 2011). All stories told by individuals are characterised as having a sequence of events that occur within a context of personal significance. Thus, a sense of value is attached to life events. For online gamers, the events that take place within games help to create

stories which lead to meaningful experiences. Through exploring the narratives of online gamers, I seek to gain insights into their lived experiences in order to illuminate an understanding of the 'field' and culture contained in online gaming (Goodson & Gill, 2011; Inglis & Thorpe, 2012).

The stories told by gamers are often unheard. By exploring and interpreting the lived experiences of individuals involved with online games, I wish to give them a voice. Through narrative research, their stories can be told in such a way that others are able to better understand the world of online gaming (Goodson & Gill, 2011). In turn, new perspectives and insights can be established, and this research may help to eliminate some of the biases these individuals face in their everyday life-worlds (Jacobsen, 2009). For instance, online gaming is seen as a leisure activity, and that gamers experience loneliness in the real-world; thus, they use this activity as a means to escape reality (Billieux, et al. 2013). To gain a deeper understanding of the culture of online gaming, I need to be sensitive and aware of my own biases. This awareness is required to avoid obstacles in the path of interpreting the narratives of the online gamers (Goodson & Gill, 2011).

"I do believe that, indeed, we are storied selves; that there is a close relationship between the stories we tell and hear and who we are; and that our stories are the cornerstone of our identities" (Seale, Gobo, Gubrium, & Silverman, 2007: 100). Narrative research or narrative inquiry has gained importance across all social sciences over the years (Holstein & Gubrium, 2012). People construct, reconstruct, and internalise their own realities through storytelling to make sense of their lives. How people interpret, digest and recount their own experiences and the experiences of other people is essentially subjective. Over time, these experiences can deliver different versions of stories from person to person; nonetheless, these stories can still be widely shared among individuals. In this sense, these stories are similar to cultural myths or folktales (Jacobsen, 2009). Every person is a storyteller, but because there are different perspectives to each story, a person cannot objectively know everything about their own reality. How a person recalls their story is through focusing on what is important to them, and what gives meaning to that story (Riessman, 2008). Consequently, a narrative can occur naturally, but takes place strategically in the context of the situation (Holstein & Gubrium, 2012; Riessman, 2008). In my dissertation I make use of a narrative approach by focusing on how participants

construct their own narratives through storytelling. The aim is to break open these perceptions and the stories of the gamers and to reconstruct their view of reality (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2012; Packer & Addison, 1989). These realities are reconstructed and retold in order to help us understand the narratives of online gamers.

People attach personal meaning to their experiences. Though retelling their stories, the aim is to emphasise certain aspects of their story and to mold it into a more sociological interpretation (Seale, et al. 2007). In the instance of people who play video games, the person might explain in detail what the game is and how the game is played. However, in *the narrative study of lives*, the aim is to explore the feelings and emotional experiences the person encounters when recollecting their gaming accounts. For gamers, their narratives help to construct their identity, and, through presenting the narratives, the reader becomes engaged in the experience of what it means to be a gamer (Riessman, 2008).

Subjectivity and inter-subjectivity are interrelated aspects of narrative research. When telling their life story, it is impossible for people not to make it personal. Nevertheless, stories can also be inter-subjective in a way that they share a culture and commonalities of experiences (Overgaard & Zahavi, 2009). Thus, narrative research strives not only to document and understand how people portray their experiences, but also to generate insight into the complexities of human lives (Seale, et al. 2007). A story might be told that is known to a lot of people, for instance, how gamers might use gaming to escape their reality. But the narrative researcher goes deeper to try to find the reasons behind the need to escape reality. These reasons will differ from person to person.

I, as the narrative researcher of this study, am interested in the way gamers make use of their stories to interpret their worlds. I follow the argument that narratives are social products constituted by individuals within their specific contexts, whether it be social, historical or cultural (May, 2002). Since people are active in interpreting their own world, it is necessary to take a qualitative, interpretivist approach to gain a deeper understanding of their life-world. Holstein and Gubrium (2012) proposes six premises that exist for narrative research:

1. One must understand that a narrative consists of parts, in order to establish an interactive activity. Understanding that there is a process that forms a narrative leads to the narrative inquiry, which, in turn, guides the focus towards the larger context.
2. Within the narrative approach, there is a commitment to collect oral stories that can be recorded and later be transcribed.
3. Narratives create a world, and, in this world, actors, places, and events are referenced - mostly in the past tense. The narrative researcher thus aims to analyse this world and attempt to make sense of the story.
4. Culture influences the narratives in a way that each story will be different depending on the contexts within which it takes place and the experiences that occurred.
5. The stories that the individuals tell serve a purpose. Because people attach meaning to specific events, explicit issues are mentioned in the narrative for a reason.
6. Through narratives, people often portray themselves in terms of how they would want to be. Therefore, narratives make identity claims (Holstein & Gubrium, 2012) and help to construct identities in the process (May, 2002). The narrative expresses authentic identity which provide truths about the person's life.

People want to be understood. They experience certain events and they constantly attach new meaning that shapes how they encounter new events. A continuity is established where experiences lead to new experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Therefore, narrative research is a way of understanding these experiences, and my aim is to make qualitative interpretations of what I hear, see and understand during my encounters with online gamers. Hence, this chapter serves as a recollection of how research respondents and I work together in order to accurately portray their life-worlds. This goal is achieved by focusing on the individual's perspectives, meanings, and subjective views in an empathetic and practical way (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Creswell, 2007).

3.2. The qualitative research design

The research design is the plan for collecting and analysing the evidence in order to answer the research questions of the study (Flick, 2009). To put it simply, the design is how I planned to study the research topic (Silverman, 2011: 5). The design covers all main elements of my dissertation, such as the goals of the study, the research questions, sampling methods, data collection methods and the analytic processes. Over past decades there has been a rise in the popularity of conducting qualitative research. However, the need for big narratives and new ground-breaking theories has moved to the background. More temporally and situationally limited narratives are required to gain insight in unique contexts (Flick, 2009: 12).

The use of a qualitative research design is appropriate, since I seek to gain thick descriptions of the phenomenon in question, namely the lived experiences of online gamers and how they achieve a sense of belonging in the virtual communities of the online world (Palinkas, 2014). Qualitative research strives towards obtaining an in-depth understanding of existing perceptions. It also seeks to establish a clear interpretation of phenomena through the viewpoint of the individual that deals with a phenomenon in their life-world (Jacobsen, 2009; Palinkas, 2014). Therefore, the phenomenon is studied in the context within which it takes place (Silverman, 2011). In other words, online gaming is investigated in the context of online gamers portraying their life-worlds through their narratives.

Within this qualitative research project, interpretation is used to explain how gamers attach meanings to certain events. It is important to realise that there are multiple perspectives on the specific phenomenon (Neuman, 2000). Interpretivist thinking allows me to gain access to the way the social actors interpret their world (May, 2002). In essence, the purpose of qualitative research is to break open, translate and understand the different viewpoints of the persons involved. Qualitative research does have its limitations, however, and questions about generalisation and validity are often part of the critique on qualitative research (Flick, 2009). Nonetheless, the use of qualitative research allows for better understanding of the world around us and finds its strength when the crucial parts of the research process are interlinked (Flick, 2009). In qualitative research, the practice of words, quotes and personal descriptions are used to represent the findings. "Data" is interpreted through assigning significance or a coherent meaning to make it understandable. This is done by opening and translating what it originally means for the person living within the phenomenon

(Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2012; Neuman, 2000). The online gamers, which experience the phenomenon on a daily basis provide me with naturally occurring data, and the strength of qualitative research is its ability to study data that is unavailable elsewhere (Silverman, 2011). In conclusion, the research design describes and justifies the choice of research strategies and aims to document the rationale behind the methodology used to conduct this study.

3.2.1. Goals of the research project

This research project aims at exploring the narratives of individuals that partake in online gaming. This study, therefore, strives to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon of online gaming. With this objective in mind, I focus on various key elements in online gaming, namely: experiences of playing, motives for playing, and how online gaming has become a part of the life of the gamer. This research project aims at investigating how online gamers experience a sense of belonging in online communities. In other words, how is a person integrated into online communities and how do they experience these communities?

3.2.2. Research problem and questions

Formulating research questions is an ongoing process that provides a framework for what the study intends to discover. These questions guide the data collection and analysis phases of the research and should not limit the focus of the study so as to cause tunnel vision (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Flick, 2009; Maxwell, 2012: 88). The following research questions guide this study:

1. How do online gamers (students at the University of the Free State) perceive and experience online gaming and its associated communities?
2. How do online gamers experience a sense of belonging in online communities?
3. How does this sense of belonging enable the online gamer to experience group associations?

4. How are emotional connections made and maintained within a virtual environment to promote a sense of belonging?

3.3. Data collection

3.3.1. Sampling

Data collection is a phase of the research process where evidence is collected relating to the phenomenon in question that enables the researcher to make inferences about it (Maxwell, 2012). The first step of the process is to know where to acquire the evidence. Recruiting participants can often be challenging within qualitative research, and, in my case, I had to rely on colleagues or contacts given by other interviewees to find suitable candidates. Consequently, sampling is a process in qualitative research that needs to be clearly defined in order to avoid empirically shallow research (Seale, et al. 2007: 405).

Qualitative research makes use of different terminology within the sampling process. Representativeness and generalisability are terms that are valuable in the quantitative fields, but it can also be used in qualitative research. However, the definitions and purposes are different. For instance, when a quantitative research study is representative and generalisable it means that the findings can apply to most members of the population being studied. On the contrary, qualitative research aims to generalise the nature of a process (May, 2002). In other words, my aim in this qualitative, interpretative research, is to understand specific social processes through investigating them within the context in which they occur. In the case of online gamers, I explore their narratives as they naturally come forth. By gaining an in-depth understanding of narratives, the aim is to be able to generalise the findings to other similar situations. In qualitative research, the term transferability is often used instead of the term generalisation, because of the uniqueness of each situation in the real world (Seale, et al. 2007; Silverman, 2011).

As mentioned, qualitative researchers are moving more towards situationally limited narratives within unique contexts (Flick, 2009: 12). In order to find individuals that experience specific phenomena in their life-worlds, it is not feasible to use probability sampling. Most people do not partake in online gaming. Therefore, to conduct my study, I required specific members of the society that participate in online gaming. The

participants are required to fit the criteria and know a lot of the subject matter. Consequently, non-probability sampling is used to find participants that can offer rich descriptions of their lived experiences of online gaming (Stangor, 2015).

In this study, I use purposive and snowball sampling to select the participants who are online gamers. I selected the participants from the student population of the University of the Free State. Purposive sampling is the optimal method to find suitable candidates, because the participants must be unique cases that are especially informative, and that can offer in-depth information (Maxwell, 2012: 93; Neuman, 2000: 198). The first participant I recruited through purposive sampling, ensuring that they fit the criteria set forth. Afterwards the snowball method of non-probability sampling was used to find other suitable candidates. Snowball sampling is a method where the researcher uses the available participants to acquire new participants that fit the criteria of online gamers (Neuman, 2000).

In order to fit the criteria to be a participant in the study, the individual has to be active in PC (personal computer) gaming or must have been active at a certain point in their life. To be able to partake in the study they must also have partaken specifically in online gaming. Additionally, participants must have engaged in some form of (Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games) MMORP-Games. A participant of any race and gender could take part in the study. However, participants had to be students at the University of the Free State.

3.3.2. Interviews

The data collection method for this study is in-depth interviews. It offers a form of gaining insight into the lived experience and subjectivity of a person's life (Seale, et al. 2007: 15). The purpose of conducting an in-depth interview is to gain an understanding of the interviewee's narrative. It aims to establish meaningful themes in the life-world of the participant which relates to their online gaming experiences (Kvale, 2007). In-depth interviews lack access to the real events and experiences that occur in the participants' life-worlds. Only an imitation of the reality by the participant who experienced the real events is provided (Riessman, 2008: 22). Hence, cooperation between researcher and participant is fundamental in order to make these events and experiences meaningful.

As a qualitative researcher, I strive for answers that offer thick descriptions of the participant's viewpoint. During each interview, open-ended questions were used, providing participants the opportunity to respond freely. The conversations were recorded verbatim (Caplovitz, 1983: 102). The use of open-ended questions allow participants to discuss their narratives in detail without inhibition (Royse, 2008: 183). It allows the narratives to be explored in order to create a clearer picture. Through open-ended questions, follow-up questions can arise that could not have been thought of during the literature review. Consequently, with wide open-ended questions, research members often wish to explore dimensions that can be off track from the aim of the study (Caplovitz, 1983: 103). Throughout the interviews, it is my responsibility to guide and facilitate the interview.

This study uses the semi-structured interviewing method to conduct in-depth interviews (Flick, 2009: 156). Semi-structured interviews make use of interview schedules to guide participants. Before interviews began, participants were provided with the interview schedule. The schedule offers a list of relevant questions to cover a range of topics about online gaming. Using an interview schedule provides structure for the interview and guides the interviewees on their path to tell their story (Kvale, 2007). It helps to gain knowledge of the life-world of the participant. The aim of the interview schedule is to assist the participant in giving detailed replies. It also helped myself, as researcher, to follow up on certain areas and not to restrict the participant (Seale, et al. 2007).

The initial period of the interview is important. As the interviewer, I must be professional and provide an environment within which participants feel cooperative. Therefore, interviews needed to take place at a location where the participants felt comfortable. A person might not feel comfortable to share intimate information within earshot of others (Seale, et al. 2007). In the case of this research project, most interviews were conducted in a private office at the University of the Free State. It allowed participants to enter a familiar environment (the campus environment) and it permitted for the interview to be uninterrupted. Two of the interviews were conducted at the private residences of the participants. In these cases, it was specifically arranged with the participants to conduct the interview at their homes where they feel comfortable. Precautions taken to ensure a successful interview will be further discussed in the ethical section (cf. section 3.4.2.).

At the start of each interview, important procedures were handled, such as the discussion of informed consent and how the interview would progress. An interview is normally an uncomfortable situation for the participant, especially with the introduction of a digital recorder. The research participants often feel unsure how to behave knowing that their account is digitally recorded. Some interviewees might feel nervous and be brief and to the point, whilst other people might feel they need to increase the sociability and be more dramatic/interesting (Seale, et al. 2007: 18). Therefore, I needed to make the participants feel comfortable with the new situation and ease them into the interview questions and process.

A relationship and rapport must be built with the interviewee. This enables them to trust me, which in turn can lead to a more authentic expression of the narrative (Seale, et al. 2007). This relationship is established by creating a relaxing and encouraging environment where the participant feels that the interviewer is trustworthy and reassuring. Through attentive listening, showing of interest, indicating an understanding of what the participant says as well as showing respect for the narrator, this relationship can be nurtured (Kvale, 2007: 55). Ensuring these aspects allows the participant to be open and engage in their lived experiences. With online gamers, talking about their favourite game at the moment and taking an interest in that game shows that I am interested in their narrative. Talking about my own favourite game to play, helps to build the relationship. It is known as self-disclosing and it helps this relationship to grow (Seale, et al. 2007). Sharing subjective experiences about certain things helped interviewees to relate and warm up towards the process. It is important to note that self-disclosed information's goal is to allow the discussion to advance towards answering the research questions (Seale, et al. 2007).

After relationships with participants are established and the interview has begun, the investigation begins to delve deeper into the life story of the research participants. The interview schedule helps the participant to further explore their experiences. But to construct a clear picture, I have to probe and "nudge" the participant to elaborate and explain their perspective more clearly (Seale, et al. 2007: 20). Thoughtfulness is necessary while probing for clarifications during the interviews. The goal is to facilitate the conversation and to dig where certain areas are unclear. This can be achieved through active listening and deciding where to dig further if the narrative seems unclear (Kvale, 2007). Consequently, the intention was to be unbiased and not to directly steer

the conversation in the direction of findings that originated in the literature (Seale, et al. 2007). In other words, caution must be given to how the questions and probes were stated in order to allow the participant to tell their story authentically. This was achieved through being unbiased and being neutral during the interview (Kvale, 2007).

3.4. Ethical clearance, procedures and considerations

3.4.1. Ethical clearance by the University of the Free State

This research study received ethical clearance from the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of the Humanities of the University of the Free State. Therefore, this study has the support of the University of the Free State, and the research design ensures that the necessary precautions are taken to obtain a high ethical standard. The University of the Free State provided an ethical clearance number, which is: **UFS-HSD2016/0330** (see appendix A).

In order to receive ethical clearance, a number of issues needed to be addressed to illustrate that the researcher is capable of conducting research and to ensure that no harm is inflicted on the participants. Within this section of the chapter, the process of the ethical clearance will be described and theoretically supported. The first requirement from the Ethics Committee is a brief explanation of the purpose of the study and the research questions that the study proposes to answer. Secondly, the aims and objectives of the study are required to be stated with a short description of the research design. The research design needs to provide clarifications on the data collection methods and analysis of the research project.

To receive ethical clearance, it was essential to provide strategic attention to risk mitigation, in order to cause no harm to participants. The nature of this study and working with online gamers may not seem harmful towards research respondents – the purpose of this study is to explore the daily lives of online gamers and their sense of belonging to online communities. However, it is necessary to maintain attentiveness and mindfulness of any possible risks or harm that might occur to the researcher and the participants. One important risk factor to be taken into account is the setting of the interviews. A safe environment needs to be available where the participants and the researcher feel comfortable. As mentioned, in two cases, interviews had to be conducted at participants' houses. In these cases, I was respectful towards the

participant and their home, and emphasised privacy. No third party was involved during the interview. The Ethics Committee was also informed that any conduct from the researcher would aim to avoid situations that might cause harm.

Other requirements by the Ethics Committee that were met, are: the informed consent sheet presented to participants at the start of each interview; inclusion or exclusion criteria of participants; and the possible impact of the research. The Committee was also provided with contact details of an available counsellor. The purpose of the counsellor is to provide a debriefing session for the participant if they feel it is necessary. The availability of a counsellor is for the possibility of the participant feeling any emotional distress evoked by the interview. All abovementioned aspects must adhere to the general ethical research standards discussed in the next section.

3.4.2. Ethical dilemmas and considerations

Any form of research contains challenges that need to be considered and handled in accordance with existing ethical codes and standards (Neuman, 2000; Seale, et al. 2007). These challenges do not only occur when it comes to the involvement of participants. Ethical dilemmas and considerations can be found throughout the research process. During the execution of the study, I must behave in a moral and professional manner (Neuman, 2000: 90). If there is a failure to uphold an ethical code of conduct, there might be consequences which could be detrimental to an academic career, and could lead to the possibility of legal action. Ethical issues that are prominent in my research study are the following: codes and consent, confidentiality, and trust (Neuman, 2000; Seale, et al. 2007).

Dealing with codes and consent is often referred to as informed consent. Informed consent stipulates that any person participating in a study has the right to know what the purpose of the study is, what the goals of the research are, and whether they may withdraw from the study at any time (Kvale, 2007). Upholding informed consent means that no individual may be coerced into participating in the study (Neuman, 2000: 92). If the participant is fully aware of what is being researched, they might behave differently than when kept in the dark. Study members might feel that the truth is not necessarily what is sought for and that telling the genuine story might be seen as uninteresting. Social desirability refers to when the participant tells the researcher what

they want to hear or the participant acts in a certain way to be more socially accepted (Stangor, 2015). The researcher can also be seen as an authoritative figure and can persuade the participant unintentionally to answer in different ways. Thus, the goal is to be empathetic and unbiased towards the narratives of the participants (Kvale, 2007). It allows the participants to feel unjudged and in turn allow them to provide authentic accounts.

Another aspect of informed consent that requires attention is how the interview can be different from what was formerly discussed to obtain consent. A limitation of informed consent is that a participant cannot be fully informed about every detail that will be covered in the interview (Silverman, 2011: 104). Due to the nature of semi-structured interviews, open and probing questions are used, leading to different areas of discussion. Participants should be informed of the proceedings of a semi-structured interview and be aware that the interview can lead to other areas of discussion which were not mentioned in the consent form.

An important ethical issue to consider is confidentiality. When dealing with human participants, it is important to respect their privacy. As a researcher, it is expected of me to protect the identity of each participant and not to reveal any identifying information (Neuman, 2000: 98; Seale, et al. 2007: 221). Conducting an in-depth interview and essentially exploring a person's intimate and private details will often leave a person with a feeling of being vulnerable. As a morally and socially responsible researcher, I must only intrude on an individual's privacy for legitimate research purposes (Neuman, 2000). Anonymity is required by separating the identity of the participants from their responses. Confidentiality can be seen as an ethical issue that goes hand in hand with another principle of research, namely nonmaleficence. The aim should always be to do no harm to any of the participants (Corey, 2014; Neuman, 2000). Consequently, each participant is given a pseudonym to protect his/her identity. All information is held in confidence and kept from the public. Thus, the responses within this study cannot be linked to the participants.

Another ethical dilemma to consider is trust within the research study. Trust can be seen as the relationship that the researcher builds with the participants and with the community (Seale, et al. 2007). It is vital to ensure that the field is kept "clean" in order for future researchers to be able to conduct their studies with future participants. In

other words, people should not feel that participating in research projects is a negative experience. They should be treated with respect in order for them to be willing to help in future research.

3.5. The analytic process

Qualitative research is mainly inductive and new concepts are constantly established (Neuman, 2000). Analysing the research findings and interviews can be considered as an ongoing process (Kvale, 2007). Before conducting the interviews, initial focus is already placed on possible patterns, identifying probable themes and establishing relationships between these themes (Seale, et al. 2007). This process occurs at the start of the literature review. Furthermore, this process is kept in mind throughout the interview process. Upon realising there might be more to a certain experience or life event, I use probing questions to explore the possible themes and patterns further. After the interviews have been completed, the analytic process repeats itself and interactions that were encountered during the interviews are interpreted.

Analysing the interviews is a process where I work with different sides of realities. The goal is not to establish one true reality of the participants' actions, experiences, feelings, and emotions, but rather to understand how these individuals produce, sustain and negotiate their own specific truths; whether it may be contradicting each other or not (Riessman, 2008; Seale, et al. 2007).

For the purpose of this study, a thematic analysis method is used (Grbich, 2013; Riessman, 2008; Seale, et al. 2007) in combination with the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) method (Pringle, et al. 2011). Thematic analysis entails using categorising and connecting strategies (Maxwell, 2012). Firstly, the aim is to use coding methods to arrange certain parts of the narratives into categories. Afterwards, the focus shifts towards reducing the findings by identifying key relationships that tie the themes together into a sequence. Throughout this process, information is eliminated that is not appropriate or that does not fit into already established relationships (Maxwell, 2012). The interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) emphasises the importance of the participants' accounts and aims to reconstruct the narratives through the use of the participants' own words (Pringle, et al. 2011). IPA focuses on identifying themes in the narrative that can be different from

each other. It also focuses on themes in the narratives that are similar. This approach allows the reader to see the different viewpoints that exist among online gamers, as well as how certain viewpoints can be the same.

By utilising and combining Grbich's (2013) and Braun and Clarke's (2006) methods of thematic analysis, we can establish six prominent stages of analysis. These stages guided the analytic process of this study to establish themes. It is important to note that these stages are not steps which need to be followed to the letter. Rather, the stages can be seen as a circular and dynamic process. To gain an accurate and clear picture, I return to certain stages and repeat certain steps in order to refine the process:

1. After data collection is completed, I need to familiarise myself with the interviews. I initially immerse into the data. Through actively reading and re-reading the interview scripts, I start to become absorbed with the narratives of the participants and, in the process, search for meanings and patterns. Making notes throughout the process is helpful with regards to making initial remarks or possible patterns that can be returned to at a later stage.
2. When the data is familiarised, I create codes for certain parts of the interview. The codes resemble possible patterns that relate to the literature. Codes are done through identifying the patterns and organising these patterns together in the same "number code". This is different from identifying themes, because themes are much larger subjects that consist of groups of codes that correlate with each other. Throughout this stage, the idea is to search for links between the theoretical and literature background, and the narratives of the participants. While constantly being aware of your theoretical foundation, the aim is to answer the research questions.
3. With the initial coding complete, the analysis for overarching themes can commence. At this stage, the focus is on various codes and identifying which codes fit together to form a bigger coherent idea. Colour coding different codes that might fit in the same theme helps to visually see which codes fit together. In this stage, codes can become overarching themes with other codes becoming sub-themes. Conversely, other codes can be discarded or make important themes on their own.

4. Now that the initial themes are branded, it is necessary to refine these themes. Certain themes might have to be separated or joined together, while other themes could be rejected entirely. This process essentially entails going through the data from a broader standpoint and establishing whether the patterns accurately portray what is told in the interviews. The notion is to be able to identify the themes now and to establish how they link together to tell a coherent story.
5. At this stage, the themes should be defined and further refined. Themes can be given names to show the essence of what each theme represents and entails. During this stage, themes should also be organised to create a narrative and coherent account of the story of online gamers. An important aspect of this stage is to create a flow and describe each theme with my voice, as the researcher, to enrich the story and give a detailed account about what the theme is and why it was chosen to be a theme.
6. The final stage is to finalise the themes and to write-up the report, giving a detailed story of my data and findings. The findings should be presented in such a way that the reader is convinced of the merit and validity of the analysis. Throughout the process, the themes should also be supported with the theoretical framework and literature background.

3.6. Ensuring the quality in qualitative research

To conduct this research study, I should be aware of my own beliefs, values, and dispositions that might exist (Maxwell, 2012: 97). These aspects can be seen as the researcher's subjectivity. In qualitative research, I need to be as accurate as possible and deliver authentic accounts of the online gamers' narratives (Kvale, 2007). Conducting sound qualitative research requires intense self-discipline and vigour. By following established practices – reading and learning from mistakes and/or achievements – our research allows us to produce quality and trustworthy findings (Riessman, 2008; Seale, et al. 2007). As a result, a form of objectivity is possible in qualitative research; however, we must regard it as objectivity that is equal to freedom from bias (Kvale, 2007: 120). By striving to be free from my own bias, I seek to establish reliable knowledge which is checked and controlled. This knowledge must be undistorted by my own prejudice and bias. In other words, when different

researchers conduct this same study, analyse the same data, and then arrive at similar conclusions, then the research is done objectively (Flick, 2009).

Two crucial concepts that allow a study to be trustworthy are reliability and validity. Reliability, or consistency, refers to whether the same result is reached every time the research is conducted (Flick, 2009; Stangor, 2015). If a study is reliable then it means that it is reproducible at other times by different researchers (Kvale, 2007). However, qualitative researchers deal with phenomena that are constantly changing and evolving (Neuman, 2000). It is difficult to consistently reach the same conclusion when investigating people's perceptions of events. Instead of reliability, the term dependability or auditability is used; which refers to how transparent the research is. Dependability allows different researchers to arrive at similar conclusions by following the same steps as the original study (Ryan, et al. 2007). Being transparent throughout the research process can also improve the reliability of the study by describing the research strategy and data analysis in detail (Silverman, 2011). In the case of this dissertation, the aim is also to link the narratives of online gamers with the theoretical framework and literature chapters, thereby anchoring my research in existing, acceptable principles.

Validity refers to how truthful a research study is. When a study is valid, it constructs a bridge between the phenomenon and the findings (Neuman, 2000: 171). A more suitable word is authenticity, which postulates that the research gives "a fair, honest, and balanced account of social life from the viewpoint of someone who lives it everyday" (Neuman, 2000: 171). Subsequently, qualitative research is not so much concerned with acquiring empirical data, but rather with giving a sincere portrayal of social life that upholds the authentic experiences of the participants (Maxwell, 2012). Validity requires that the study maintains the principle of truthfulness by giving a detailed account of the feelings and understandings of the participants – ensuring that their narratives are not distorted or falsely portrayed (Neuman, 2000).

Reflexivity is another aspect within qualitative research that aims to ensure the quality of qualitative research. The researcher can be viewed as the research instrument within the qualitative approach (Creswell, 2007: 38). With this statement, the insinuation can be made that researchers are to be held responsible and should reflect on themselves and their work (Medico & Santiago-Delefosse, 2014). As a qualitative

researcher, I aim to be honest and authentic with myself, my work and the reader (Tracey, 2010). As a researcher, I have a distinct ability to influence the environment I am working in. By becoming more transparent and creating the opportunity for the reader to relate to the subjective account of the participant, the reader can enter the reality of the participant (Medico & Santiago-Delefosse, 2014).

In conclusion, the purpose of this chapter is to discuss the paths taken to conduct this research project. A methodological account is provided to illustrate the steps that I took to produce a reliable and valid dissertation. The goal of this dissertation is to explore the narratives of online gamers, in order to gain a better understanding of how online gamers live with this phenomenon on a daily basis. To achieve this goal, research questions were posed along with the data collection methods utilised. Throughout this chapter, theoretical grounding supported the choices made. Moving forward, the dissertation shifts towards presenting the findings.

Chapter 4: The lived experiences of online gamers

The analytic process for this dissertation employs the thematic analysis method (Grbich, 2013; Riessman, 2008) in combination with the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) method (Pringle, et al. 2011). Together with these two analytic methods, an in-depth exploration is undertaken in order to gain a phenomenological understanding of online gamers' lived experiences (Inglis & Thorpe, 2012; Jacobsen, 2009). The narrative of each research participant is analysed in order to gain insight into their perceptions, experiences, understandings, and emotions relating to online games and the associated communities (Jacobsen, 2009).

Presenting the findings of this research study consists of two chapters. The first chapter focuses on the lived experiences of online gamers at an individual level. The aim is to explore the journey players embark on to become online gamers. The first main theme is how gamers become involved with video games and how it develops to an involvement with online games. The chapter also seeks to establish the driving forces which motivate gamers to continue playing video games. Socialising with friends, being competitive, and having a passion for online gaming seem to be the main forces that encourage players to maintain being engaged in gaming. Additionally, attention is given to how video games influence the social construction of the reality of players (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). Video games allow players to place themselves in the shoes of the characters they play. Consequently, the events that occur in games are often seen as real events which create memories and unique experiences for the players (Billieux, et al. 2013; Latorre, 2015). Lastly, the chapter aims to gain insight into how online games influence the everyday lives of gamers and how it has an impact on their identities.

The second chapter presenting the findings focuses on the lived experiences of online gamers on a larger level of interaction. Firstly, perceptions and stereotypes surrounding online gamers are investigated through the viewpoints of the study participants. Moreover, the chapter seeks to establish whether players feel a sense of belonging in online gaming communities. Within this theme, insight is gained on how individuals become a part of online gaming communities as well as the possibility of experiencing a personal relatedness with persons through online gaming.

During the data collection phase of this research project, eight participants were recruited through the purposive and snowball sampling methods (cf. section 3.3.1.). An in-depth interview was conducted with each participant to establish their narrative of online gaming. All eight participants are white South Africans. Persons of different races were approached to participate in the study, however, it was difficult to find participants that fit all the aforementioned inclusion criteria (cf. section 3.3.1.). This relates to literature which suggest that, due to the unequal incomes of South Africa, mostly households in higher income brackets are able to engage in online gaming (Walton & Pallitt, 2012).

All members of this study are young adults ranging from 18 to 25 years old. During the time of the interviews, each gamer was enrolled at the University of the Free State. Throughout the passages, interviewees are referred to by their pseudonyms. To familiarise ourselves with the participants, I will provide a brief description of each participant. This information cannot be used to identify any of the participants. The aim is rather to provide a context, in order to differentiate between the players. Stephen, an industrial psychology honours student, describes himself as a person who is very passionate about video gaming. He has created his own business which allows people to buy and create their own gaming computers. He finds immense joy in gaming and wants everyone to become gamers to join his joyful experience. Peter studies B.Sc. (Information Technology). He wishes to immigrate to the U.S.A. upon completing his degree. Over the years, Peter has become less passionate about online gaming. He expresses a lack of connection with the online gaming community.

Aaron is currently conducting his Master's degree in History. He previously studied Journalism and Graphics Design. Aaron is infatuated with how games are able to pull you in and allow you to experience unique events. For him, games provide you with the opportunity to feel what it would be like to be a soldier or a commander during historical and modern wars. Our next gamer, David, is a B. Education student. He loves teaching children and he carries this quality over to gaming. David constantly finds himself helping other players and wanting the gaming community to establish a better sense of belonging for all players. For David, feeling a part of the community is important. Another participant that studies B.Sc. (Information Technology), Ben, feels that gaming creates an environment to learn new things. You can learn specific qualities from other people and apply that knowledge to real-life circumstances.

Zoey, one of the two female research participants, studies B. Accounting. She feels that gaming is a way to socialise with her friends and to maintain a connection with her boyfriend. Gaming allows her to be transported to another world within which she is able to forget about her daily problems. The other female gamer, Emily, is conducting her Master's in Fine Arts. For her, gaming is a way to maintain a connection with her brother who passed away. He introduced her to the world of gaming when she was young and helped her to become involved with online gaming. Presently, gaming is a way to socialise with her boyfriend and to relax after coming home from her studio. Lastly, Eric, who also studies B. Education, struggled to become fully engaged with online gaming. Through his upbringing, he had to share the home computer with his brother and they had problems with internet accessibility. However, as a result, he became very close to his brother and now they constantly play together.

Each gamer has a unique perspective towards video gaming. Some players might share a viewpoint, and some might have the opposite opinion, but none of them have similar outlooks and lived experiences. Throughout the findings, narratives are compared and contrasted to mould a picture of what it is like to be an online gamer in the associated online gaming communities.

4.1. Becoming involved

4.1.1. Becoming involved with video games

The first emerging theme explores how participants become involved with video games and how it develops into an involvement with online games (cf. section 2.1. & 2.2. on definitions for video games and online gaming). For all the participants, it started at an early age and recalling exactly how it began poses to be a difficult task. Nonetheless, most of the gamers remember that it was their family members who introduced them to gaming. Five out of the eight gamers state that they have an older brother who plays games or who played games. Growing up, it was their older brother who taught them how to play video games. Conversely, in Aaron's case, it was his nephews who played games and who allowed him to play on their computer. Where there were no family members to make the introduction, individuals had to rely on their own curiosity and interest. With Peter and Stephen, it was mainly self-exploration with

computers, along with their friends, that stirred an interest to become more involved with video games.

Stephen does not have an older brother who introduced him to gaming, but he recollects that he played on his father's computer. It even seemed to him that his father wanted to be a gamer.

He actually had a lot of old games, so it looked like he wanted to become a gamer in 1995-1996, but he never came to it. So, he let me play all those games. (Stephen)

Besides his father's computer, Stephen's neighbour often invited him to play on his console gaming device. Having a home computer seems to be something that allowed research participants to engage with video games on their own terms. Peter remembers a computer being in his household which he experimented on and learned to play games on.

I had a computer since I was like ... three/four, I can't even remember, but it was way long [ago]. And that thing had games on and that's how I got into computers and eventually got my own and started to get games. Oh! I got a PlayStation 1 in ... 2004 no, no, way before that, but I had a few games for it, and I played that every time...

... firstly, it was a home computer, but then I just took it to my own bedroom, and then it was mine because my parents never used it. (Peter)

Ben tells a similar story of a home computer which stood in the house. He experimented on it and learned to play games at an early age. Ben continues by stating the following:

I always had an interest in computers and gaming... It's a good way of telling stories and stuff, unlike just watching a movie. (Ben)

This statement prickles at the notion that games offer something more for the participants. Video games seem to provide more interactivity than other forms of media.

I always liked history and stuff, that's why I wanted to study archaeology. Uhm, and games like Rome: Total War, Medieval: Total War... I was fascinated by the way it portrays history in the sense that you control the decisions of that time, and... that types of stories always interested me.

(Ben)

Ben's interest in history and the ability to control the story pulled him towards video games. Shifting to Aaron's perspective, he builds on Ben's viewpoint with his interest in war and history. For him, games offer the chance to gain insight into how it would have been to be in a war. Besides having brothers to introduce a person into gaming, friends can also be a way to become involved. In Emily's hometown, she remembers that a lot of children and teenagers formed groups who enjoyed playing games together.

There was like this whole community in [hometown] then. Like, people of the, like boys of the same age that would LAN and just go crazy.

(Emily)

LAN'ing (Local Area Network'ing) is a popular method that allows players to come together in the same physical area and connect with their computers. Through LANs people play games together and in the process socialise; creating new friendships and bonds.

We played every day and every weekend we went to someone's house and LAN'ed the whole weekend away. (Peter)

Peter's statement illustrates that video games can become a part of a person's daily life at a young age. David adds to this by recalling a time that he went to a LAN-shop where people from all over town came to play games together. Additionally, Zoey partook in LANs and saw it as a social event and a place to learn more about games. Through these accounts, we can see that video games can enter a person's life at an early age and that players often use it to socialise with their friends.

4.1.2. Becoming involved with online gaming

The previous section constructs the image of people seeking to play video games with their friends from a young age. Consequently, online gaming allows players to be connected with each other and play over the internet (Boulton & Cremin, 2011), making it a more accessible method to play video games with other players. Most members of the study recall that they experienced a sense of what online gaming can be through participating in LANs. Playing on the internet is more or less the same for them, but instead of sitting in the same room, you can play from your own house. In the past, more and more video games were starting to move towards online capabilities. Research participants recall that if you did not have an internet connection, you would miss out on new gaming experiences. Therefore, participants were aware of online gaming but were not able to become a part of it unless they had internet access.

There was a certain time when LAN'ing became... the old-school thing, I don't know. So, a lot of my friends started playing online and we didn't have LAN's anymore, and when we had LAN's we played online with other people. So, I just had to go online. I don't really like it, I prefer LAN'ing and being there with the people, playing with people I know... But, now playing Overwatch, I actually sometimes like it, sometimes people are really rude, but yeah... that's how I didn't really have a choice. I think everyone has to be online now because all of the games are just going online. (Zoey)

Zoey paints the picture of a world within which online gaming is becoming the norm and that people do not play video games anymore unless it has an online aspect. In Zoey's statement, we are provided with hints towards some aspects of online gaming; playing with strangers, and that these people can often be rude. Research suggests that anonymity is a large factor that influences people's behaviour in the online world and can produce negative experiences for players - leaving them to feel disconnected from the community (Barlett & Gentile, 2016; Zimmerman & Ybarra, 2016). The concept of online communities and interactions with the broader gaming community is explored in the following chapter. It aims to open a larger sense of experiences which

players live on a daily basis and it focuses on the experiences of the online gamer within a larger community (cf. section 5.2.).

Video games started to become an internet activity and most participants could not partake in it because of internet inaccessibility. By the time most study members gained internet access other gamers were already accustomed to it.

Well I never had the internet connectivity until... I think my 2nd year when I started studying at the university. I begged my parents to get internet, because all my friends were playing online. And they were so... They had fun, you know. It was fun for them, and... it just looked fun and I never could play. Like single player games were getting boring. They were fun, but... I mean there wasn't competitiveness... You can't be competitive in single player games. Uhm yeah, that's where I begged my parents to get me internet and when I got it I just kept playing online. Because I went to LANs, and I... like everyone got internet and they stopped going to LANs. And that's like: okay, I also want to play with my friends. Yeah, and that's where I persuaded my parents to get internet. And yeah once they did, I started playing DotA (Defence of the Ancients) a lot. (Aaron)

Aaron explains that he was aware of the online experience. It felt like he missed out on an experience which seemed like a lot of fun. He wanted to be a part of this world with his friends. After players eventually gained internet access, video games became an even bigger part of their lives. The first experiences were daunting, but the positive sides of online gaming started to become clear shortly after.

Back then... I was scared to play stuff online, because people can be so mean. Uhm, so I kind of shied away from it. (Emily)

Emily shares her fear of strangers being cruel or rude. At first, when Emily's brother introduced her to online games, she was uncertain if this was something she wanted to partake in. She remembers feelings of curiosity when her brother introduced her to this new experience that allowed him to play online with other people. It made her more interested in this new aspect of video games that she was not a part of. After a while of playing online, she became intrigued with the thought of meeting random

people. It was not so scary anymore and she even started to make friends online. Shifting towards Eric's narrative, it felt like he was being left behind as well, because he did not have an internet connection to play with his friends. Only after his family got internet he started to play online video games more.

I remember my first online gaming experience was also on my father's computer. He got a computer and we also had internet, and a lot of my friends played World of Warcraft and after a long time of struggling to try to get the game, trying to get the game to work, I finally got it working. And usually at nights when my father has finished his work on the computer, I get a small chance. Then I can quickly go play a game of WoW. So, that's where it started. (Eric)

When we consider these narratives, we can see that the players already knew of the online gaming experience and was mostly inhibited by the lack of internet access. Playing locally with friends and LAN'ing was an introduction to the possibility of online gaming. It made the transition from playing offline video games towards online video games much easier. For most players, the idea of remaining in the offline gaming world was not something to which they looked forward to. If you could not play online games with your friends, then you would miss out on the largest part of what gaming could offer.

4.1.3. Online and offline gaming: differences and preference

All of the participants explain that there is a substantial difference between playing an offline game and playing an online game. Peter enlightens us in the following way:

... online is for playing with friends [or other people] and offline is for playing alone. (Peter)

Playing online and offline can be equally fun, and both have unique and appealing qualities. Eric elaborates more on this notion through the following statement:

There's definitely a big difference. To me it feels when you're playing an offline game, it's similar to watching a DVD or a movie. But when you're

let's say, playing an online game, it feels more like watching a live stream on TV. (Eric)

With these statements, it seems that online gaming is more an activity that takes place in real-time. With offline gaming, you can *watch the movie* on your own time. Returning to Peter's view, he supports this perspective by saying that:

... online gaming demands a commitment of your time for that while, where offline gaming offers more freedom with your time. (Peter)

For a few of the research participants, offline gaming provides an opportunity to relax. Gamers prefer playing offline/single player games when they wish to explore a new story. Thus, single player games offer the player a chance to play alone and embark on stories which they find appealing. However, the preferences for most of the participants are to play online games. Emily describes her viewpoint of offline and online games:

In an offline game... you just play the game on your own time. It's fine. But then there's this feeling of... isolation in a way. Where you play an online game, you know this is other people playing with you. Which is nice. I think it's a sense of community you get. Because games, I think games are one of the large unifiers among people. I mean look at Pokémon GO, what it's doing to communities. I think on campus integration was actually starting to happen with Pokémon GO. Because it doesn't matter what our background or race or colour or gender is; we're playing the same game. And this is fun. We have that in common and that's cool. (Emily)

Emily starts to illuminate a feature of online games. It has the ability to bring people together and relates to literature that argues that online gaming communities can make people feel a part of something larger (Gabbiadini, et al. 2014). David shares his view by describing this feeling of a larger connection in online gaming.

There's a much more diverse community in online gaming obviously. Also, a lot more people you can meet... offline gaming... It was mostly 20 people that I knew who played games regularly... We had a LAN once a month... Not a lot of people would actually pitch up for offline games if

you had internet already. So, yeah, it's much more diverse online. Much more people you can get to know. It's all around the world. It's much better. (David)

Online gaming offers a better experience for David and he feels that he is able to connect to people outside of his current location. He feels that it is possible to become a part of a larger world. Eric builds on this viewpoint by stating that playing against other people enriches his gaming experience.

A[n] offline game, it's always the same. You have to do the same things. You get used to how the game works. But with an online game you introduce humans and that drastically changes the way you play. The experience you get from gaming, playing with other people. (Eric)

Although it may seem that online gaming is the superior option of the two methods of gaming, some participants feel that offline gaming or single player games can offer a more significant experience. Aaron states that he does not think offline gaming is a bad thing. Playing an offline game is comparable to when a person wants to play a game with a unique storyline, which is unavailable in online games. In Peter's case, he feels that offline games can offer you more of a personal challenge which he finds enjoyable. For him, you are able to better yourself and compare your previous achievements to your new achievements. In the end, it may seem that online gaming offers mainly positive experiences. Yet, as the chapter further explores the participant's experiences, negative aspects of online gaming comes to the fore. Zoey concludes this section with her viewpoint on the difference between online and offline gaming and illustrates the possibility of the virtual world to be a negative place.

Online there is a lot more people, and a lot of people I don't know. There are most times only two people I know. That's the people I play with now. We arranged to play this hour. And with LAN'ing there is more social time in between games. You can take a break and then... do something. Talk a bit, or so... With online it's, I think, it gives a lot of space for cyber bullying. Because people can really rant on you. And it's not your fault they lost or the team lost. I mean you did your best. So, people say things they wouldn't say in real life. If you were in the room with them, LAN'ing,

they wouldn't have said those things. So I think that's the major difference. The guts people have, and the things they say. (Zoey)

Zoey's experiences of online games demonstrate the negative side that people can experience. Barlett and Gentile (2016) informs that anonymity influences people to behave rudely towards each other because they feel there will not be consequences in the same way as in real-life. These intricate facets of the online community are further explored when participants share their experiences of the online video game communities in other parts of the analysis chapters.

4.1.4. MMORPG's and how it relates to online gaming

Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) are essentially online games. However, in chapter 2, the literature suggests that MMORPGs offer a substantially distinct experience from other online games (cf. section 2.2. & 2.3.). In this section, the focus shifts to how the participants moved from previous online gaming experience to MMORPGs. It is necessary to explore how each participant perceives MMORPGs in order to understand their journey into their MMORPG experiences.

When I first got introduced to such games it was with World of Warcraft, and... What it meant was a lot of people playing, not necessarily together. But a lot of people playing in one big world where you can run around and you can actually meet new people. Just like you can do in the real world. But this is only a character that you're playing as, so you can... be anyone you want to be basically. And just run around and meet new people, drink, party with them. And from there on you can maybe do quests together. Or challenges the game has. And team up, like that. And the thing is that you can meet many different people. (Eric)

Eric starts with what an MMORPGs means to him. It holds a vast amount of possibilities within which a player can conduct him/herself. It is, in principle, a large world where interactions with many people are possible, you can be anyone you want to be, linking it with studies done on MMORPGs (Badrinarayanan, Sierra, & Martin, 2015; Billieux, et al. 2013). This indicates that online gaming can be more than just a

game and that a person can live themselves into a different world (in effect be immersed into another reality). Immersion is an important aspect of the experiences of online gamers and is explored in more depth in this chapter (cf. section 4.4.).

*... for me, it's a very, **very** large world with a lot of choices and courses and... a variety of landscapes and things to do. Also what is fun for me. It runs in real time which is actually quite fun. Because then you literally have a calendar and when it's Halloween, it's Halloween in the game. I like that participation of the virtual world with the actual world and how they connect with each other... And then obviously also the character you create. You become very invested... because it takes so very long to level them up... And the guilds, ugh, it's just, it's that sense of community there is... So much fun, it's brilliant. I like that a lot because you can really do so much. You can send mail to people and you can whisper to them and then you can buy a cockroach in Undercity as a pet!*
(Emily)

Emily elaborates on what MMORPGs are and what they have to offer. It is clear that MMORPGs go further than previous descriptions of online games. It provides a more genuine experience if you open yourself to it. For others, MMORPGs do not seem that alluring. Stephen and Aaron suggest that these types of games can be too time consuming and can become repetitive. You invest a lot of time in the game and, for them, it does not feel as if the outcome is justified. They prefer to play other games with their friends in order to socialise. In concurrence, such a large world can be overwhelming and can deter new players from joining the community. Zoey explained that she was excited to start playing MMORPGs, but that such games are difficult to learn.

The purpose of this section is to illustrate how MMORPGs are different from general online games. Thus, it is necessary to investigate how the participants become involved with this aspect of online gaming. Due to the nature of MMORPGs, new aspects are introduced; such as the possibility of socialising with strangers online and how gaming can be an immersive experience. Throughout the following themes and sub-themes, the chapter aims to provide a deeper understanding of the experiences of the participants and how online gaming has become a core part of their life-worlds

(Jacobsen, 2009). The following account sets the tone for what motivated Eric to become more involved with video games in order to socialise with his friends.

... at school, a lot of my friends played these games. I never really knew about them, I never really got into them. It only started when I heard some of my friends talking about it. Each time we had a break at school, they started talking about the games and after school, they would start talking again and start strategizing before they even go home. And this sparked something in me... Like I also wanted to be a part of it. I couldn't really talk with them about the game so I didn't know what was going on. Until they helped me to get the game and from thereon I started talking with them before we'd go home, learning new things from them. (Eric)

4.2. The driving forces

Various driving forces exist that motivate people to play video games. Gamers have different motives for playing offline video games and for playing online video games. Offline games aim to deliver satisfying experiences a person can embark on as an individual. Participants state that they play single player games to immerse themselves in a story and to relax from playing competitively against other players. Throughout the interviews, two driving forces stood out regarding why the players constantly engage in online gaming. Firstly, playing online provides the opportunity to socialise with friends and strangers alike. Secondly, when playing online games, a feeling of competitiveness is inevitable and drives a person to continue playing. Competitiveness motivating people to play online games is something that is seen in other research (Fuster, et al. 2014).

4.2.1. Socialisation

Online games create an environment for friends to participate in activities and to socialise with each other without being in the same location (Badrinarayanan, Sierra, & Martin, 2015). Ben explains that, with online gaming, you can have different experiences every time you play it. You can have fun with your friends and learn things from each other. He continues that it is also possible to do these things with random

people. Socialising can be such a crucial factor for some players that it influences their choice of whether to play the game or not.

I promise you I won't buy a multiplayer game because of the game itself.

I will buy it because I play it with my friends.

... It's the thing [why] I keep on playing. I can play with friends and hear about their lives and hear about stuff I didn't know. (Stephen)

By stating this, Stephen shares his feelings about how important it is for him to socialise with his friends. Being able to socialise with his friends determines whether or not he would buy the game. With Zoey, it is a similar situation; she strongly prefers to play online games with her friends and will not necessarily play it without them. In other instances, the aspect of socialising with strangers enriches the experience of playing online.

... It's definitely something that I enjoy, meeting new people, but on a different level than you usually do. You can really socialise a lot, learn a lot from other people. More than one would expect. And there was actually so many people you can meet online. And all of them have the same interests as you, because they're also playing the same game as you're playing. So I really enjoyed meeting people online, especially in games. (Eric)

Eric explains that playing online can be a social experience. In some cases, he prefers to stay at home and play games with his friends, rather than going out to clubs. It is easier for him to stay at home – relaxing and feeling safe, instead of spending money and partying with his friends. In concurrence with what Eric said, Emily depicts her socialising experience with online gaming as a “human necessity” and that it also eases the socialising aspect with her friends.

I think it's just a basic human need, socialising. And that [gaming] is also a very interesting and new way of socialising. Because you socialise in the form of something else. And that's obviously much more fun than just texting.

... You feel social while still being isolated, which is good I think for a lot of [people]. I have honestly become a bit of an agoraphobic (laughs). Not because of games. I've always been very... shy-ish, I don't like the crowds and stuff. Uhm, and that's a way of socialising without that... scariness of a physical crowd being everywhere. (Emily)

Playing with friends is an important feature of online games. It is how these individuals keep contact with their friends, and, in the end, it caters for them in terms of their interpersonal socialisation motive (cf. section 2.4.2.). David expands on this narrative by explaining that he rarely sees his friends in person. Playing online games is a way to connect with them. It is a convenient way of socialising with your friends and you can do it from the comfort of your own home. Although socialising with friends and meeting new people can be an appealing prospect that drives people to play games, another motivation stands out which seems to be more influential on players to take part in online games, namely competitiveness.

4.2.2. Competitiveness

Competitiveness can be a driving force that motivates people to engage in online gaming (Fuster, et al. 2014). As the definition of gaming suggests, games evoke artificial conflict between the players in order to establish a winner, and thus, a loser (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). Therefore, games create an environment within which players are able to compete and receive positive outcomes; such as winning a match and receiving in-game rewards. When asked about the prevalence of competitiveness in online gaming, all participants share that they feel a sense of competitiveness in the online environment – whether it be from themselves or from other players.

... Most people are competitive at heart. So, you always want to do good and learn and do things like that. And gaming is just another way of doing it... an unconventional way. But it's starting to become more and more popular. (Ben)

According to Ben, most people tend to be competitive by nature and naturally want to achieve positive outcomes. “*Who isn't competitive with online games?*”, a question

posed by Aaron, which indicates that people play online games to win. He shares his feelings on how his own competitive side began:

I wanted to be the highest level. And I remember they were such high levels and I wanted to also be there and like brag: yeah that's my level and I killed [the final boss] this fast. And that's where the aspect got like, competitive. (Aaron)

Social comparison provides an explanation for why people can be competitive. Social comparison arises when one observes others in domains of achievements, interpersonal relationships, and health (Ozimek & Bierhoff, 2016: 272). In the case of online games, people compare with each other on a domain of achievement. Wanting to be as good as your friends, or better than other people, motivates you to play better. Emily elaborates on being competitive as being a part of human nature.

I think it's something international. I think it's something human. It's human to compete. It's human to want to be the best. Not even, not necessarily say that I want to be the best. But you think it. I think it's a human reaction. (Emily)

While competitiveness can be a part of human nature, it can also be something learned through culture. For Zoey, gaming has become something she uses to relax instead of playing competitively. She explains that her parents were very strict on her to succeed in life. Thus, gaming gives her a break from being competitive in real-life.

They were really hard on me to be good at everything and I think that's why I take the more casual thing. Because I have to be the best in everything. So when it comes to gaming I don't have to be the best. Then I can just be myself. (Zoey)

It is expected of Zoey to achieve well in her academics, hence, she feels no need to be competitive in gaming. Ben builds on this view by sharing his opinion on how competitiveness can be a cultural aspect instead of a part of human nature.

My opinion is: South Africa is very sport centred. Because we have rugby, we have soccer, we have cricket, we have athletics. We are a very sports based culture. So I think most of the players are ex-sports

players because you played sports in school. I played sports in school. And they can't go to the cricket or to the rugby field anymore, because you're doing jobs and studying and stuff. So you play online games. And that same... It's just inherited from that, I think. (Ben)

Competitiveness can come from our human nature, but it can also be something you learn from society by comparing yourself to others (Kendall, 2011: 73). However, it is definitely something that is being experienced in online gaming. Upon further exploration, it seems that competitiveness can be a good thing, which drives you to become a better player. On the other hand, too many competitive feelings can have a negative impact on your gaming experience.

... That's sadly the thing. I don't become too competitive. And if I find myself becoming too competitive, I try to remove myself then from it for a while. Just to like cool my head and then I go back. I would say because I don't like it.

... I didn't use to be like that. I used to be much more competitive and angry. I used to break the controllers and almost throw the remotes against the wall and kick stuff. I used to be, react in very bold and outrageous ways. But then I realised that: this is not right, I don't, this isn't right to react like this. And like: if I'm going to become like this I don't want to then play, because it takes the fun away. (Emily)

Being too competitive can become a deteriorating factor instead of enhancing Emily's gaming experience. Other gamers also express this viewpoint. Some of them played in professional gaming leagues and a few of them performed well. They performed so well in fact, that they were invited to play at the *rAge Expo* (a competition event held annually with prize money for winning teams) (About rAge, 2017). Peter illuminates how competitiveness tainted his gaming experiences:

If you go competitive you don't play for fun anymore. And that destroyed the whole fun aspect. So every time I play a game it's like boring for me. (Peter)

Even though reaching *rAge* gave some of the research participants a sense of achievement, the competitiveness impacted negatively on their relationships with their

teammates. Teammates would expect more from them and when the team did not win, players would start yelling and blaming each other.

You relax, even though you play competitive in a public server, you're relaxing. You just want a fun time. [But] playing competitive puts a lot of stress on you... Because you actually need to be the best... Not out of fun. (Aaron)

Playing games for relaxation and enjoyment are some of the reasons why gamers started playing. Although competing seems exciting at the start, when people begin to take it too seriously, it becomes more of a hassle instead of simply playing a video game. It starts to feel like “work”, and that is why most of the participants who played professionally gave it up. They continued playing video games casually, competing against themselves and other players internally instead of competing professionally.

4.2.3. Having a passion for gaming

Socialising with friends and being a competitive gamer motivates a player to invest time in gaming. However, these motivations are not efficient in describing why online gaming has become a part of each participant's life-world. In chapter 2, I investigate the role of passion and how it influences a person to spend more time on something they feel passionate about (cf. section 2.4.1.). Having a passion for something can be an important motivator for a person to partake in something. A player can have a harmonious or obsessive passion towards gaming, and both passions can be seen in the narratives of the players (Fuster, et al. 2014). In the interviews, feelings about passion towards online gaming are explored.

... [gaming] almost directs my whole life. Because... even though I'm only casual gaming. It's so nice. It's the best thing I have sometimes. Like sometimes my friends would ask, or people in my class would ask me to go out with them on Fridays and then I'd say: 'No, I can't, I have a meeting or something'. Not a meeting, but I have already arranged something. And then I go and just play games. So, I could've gone out with them, go clubbing and everything. But I rather chose games and I actually told them: 'No, I have plans'. And it's not plans I've made, I

mean, I can do it any day. And uhm... yeah, also when I have to get a new PC now because it's... it's so old. Now I have to budget and think: okay, but if I buy this, how much money would I have left for this and: should I eat this month or should I buy a computer? (Zoey)

Even though Zoey jested about not eating to save money, it still gives an insight into how gaming has become a part of her life. It guides her daily choices and long-term plans. Zoey presents a side of obsessive passion where she would direct most of her time towards gaming rather than socialising with her friends. However, upon further exploration, Zoey explains that she understands the importance of her life not revolving around gaming (cf. section 4.4.1.). In contrast, a harmonious passion can be seen with Stephen when he shares the following:

I'm so passionate about this that I even started my own company because of online gaming. So like now other gamers also feel the joy of online gaming...

... For me, it's just like having fun. At the end of the day, you do gaming to have fun. (Stephen)

Stephen's passion is expressed through his feelings of immense joy while playing games with his friends and other people he has met through gaming. While some are very passionate towards gaming, others have a more casual expression of passion.

I am passionate about it... it's a great way to spend my time... But, you know... it doesn't control my life. There's more to life than just gaming online. I'm passionate about a lot of things. (Aaron)

I would say I am [passionate] in some degree. But I'm not the most passionate online gamer out there. I don't take it as seriously as most of my friends do. I see myself as more of a casual type of gamer. But the last few months I've been more involved and starting to take it actually more seriously. So yeah, but I try not to get too serious about the game because I still have other more important things like college and whatever. (Eric)

I can say that I'm passionate about online gaming. I was actually. Now it's more or less: I want to finish my responsibilities first. I still love playing online games. I like playing games in general... but at this moment in my life I just want to get the things sorted. Then I can return and play the games without having a thing behind, stuck in the back of my head: I have to do this, and I have to do [that]. (Ben)

These three participants agree that they have a sense of passion towards gaming in general, but that it is not the main focus in their lives at the moment. It might be a growing passion or a fading one, yet, it seems that there are other parts in their lives that also require attention. Passion can lead to becoming obsessed with something. Keeping the balance between losing yourself into gaming and losing interest in it, is something that is explored further in each interview with the gamers (cf. section 4.4.1.).

Lastly, David mentions that he is also very passionate about online gaming and that he likes becoming involved with the community. He finds himself thinking about games during the day, making plans and strategising for future games. Where David remains passionate about competitive games, Peter has lost most of his passion for online games. For him, people spoiled online gaming and he stopped playing competitive games, because it was no longer fun. Other people clearly can have an influence on how passionate you want to become about something such as online gaming. Exploring how the community supports a player's gaming motives and needs is discussed in the following chapter (cf. section 5.2.).

4.2.4. Mundane motivations and demotivations

I explored two main driving forces for players to become involved with online gaming, and how having a passion towards gaming can guide your life choices or just be a casual harmonious passion. In this section, the aim is to cast light on other motives to play games, as well as on factors that deter people from playing games. Firstly, some participants mention that games offer a challenge and that they enjoy the aspect of solving complicated puzzles. Having to use your intellect to outsmart your opponents and rising up to challenging objectives drives the players to become more invested. For Peter, completing a game in full is a challenge he extends to himself. In most games, you can complete the game's main story, and afterward, you can continue

playing and doing secondary missions, such as collecting items in the game that are hidden. Not many players are very concerned about completing these tasks. However, Peter enjoys completing the game to the fullest.

I don't know [why]. I just fell in love with the thought of grinding in games. I have to... it's nothing part of the story. It's not needed to complete the game. But I love to see that 100% at the end of the game when you have done everything and collected everything. (Peter)

Not everyone shares this viewpoint, however. Players mention that achieving a sense of accomplishment is something that motivates them to continue playing (Badrinarayanan, Sierra, & Martin, 2015). For Emily, gaming is a way of maintaining a connection with her brother who introduced her to gaming. He passed away, but, through playing games, she reminisces on how they used to play together and that's a different motive for playing games instead of socialising or playing competitively.

Repetitiveness is the main recurring aspect that demotivates gamers from playing certain games. When games only offer one thing or when you must do the same thing over and over in a game, it can become quite boring for players and it causes them to lose interest. Most players agree that they want a new experience when playing a game and that a game should hold their interests in a unique way.

4.3. The social construction of reality

4.3.1. Immersion

Video games offer an immersive experience distinct from other forms of media (Culig, et al. 2013; Lorentz, et al. 2015). Unlike books and films, games allow you to become the centre of an interactive story. Zoey shares her opinion on why games offer more for her than other media. She illuminates that games can be an experience different from other activities:

... Gaming is above them. It's just fun... With books there's only the one storyline and that's it. You can't change a book. But in games, especially in RPG games, the choices you make have an effect on the whole game. So your whole game changes as long as, or as soon as, you make a

choice. And I like that: not knowing what's gonna happen, and being able to play it again and getting different outcomes. (Zoey)

The third main theme to emerge in this dissertation is how video games are able to pull you into another world and the way it takes your focus away from the real world. It may seem like an escape from reality, which can be true in some cases, but immersion can be different from person to person. In *The Social Construction of Reality* by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1991), the notion is brought forth that individuals construct their own realities using human consciousness. Although video games provide a virtual reality for players, the stories produced by events within the games can be seen as real stories for the players – becoming a part of their reality (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2012). When players immerse themselves into a game, they allow virtual reality to become a part of their own realities. Consequently, it becomes a part of their narratives. *The Social Construction of Reality* and how it relates to online gaming is discussed more deeply in the theoretical chapter (cf. section 1.6.).

Firstly, it is important to establish what immersion means for the players in order to move towards how it influences their actions and emotions. For the players, being immersed means you become the character with which you are playing. You start to live in the moment of playing video games and it takes up your full attention. You play more intensely, becoming more competitive, and you feel attached to the character. Immersion makes it feel as if making a mistake and dying in the game would affect you to a larger extent than it really should. Becoming immersed in a game allows for a more genuine experience and allows you to create lasting memories. Emily begins the journey of what it means to become immersed with the following account:

I think the moment when you start to speak of the character as yourself. And everyone does that because you don't say that: I was playing my character, found loot in this specific area, or my character played this dungeon... I played this dungeon, I killed them, I got the loot. Uh, I think that whole relating to your character that it becomes you and obviously also the viewpoints. The first-person view. The point of view where you can see where the hand [is]. Where your eyes would be and you would see the hands like it is your own. That has a lot of immersive qualities. I mean, and that isn't something that's new. It was something that was

*studied in the 17th century by artists who painted their hands from this point of view. Who started to look at the immersion that looking at something from a certain point of view has on you personally. So I think they just took that a step further obviously. Because then... it moves and you control it. I think that is the big thing, the point of view that it becomes you and while you control it. Especially in games like, well in every game. But also games like Dragon Age and Mass Effect. Because you also make its choices. You determine your character's personality and that character becomes you. Because either you play completely the opposite of who you are **or** you play who you are. (Emily)*

Emily recollects the story of how being thrust into the eyes of the character, and how you are able to control that character, makes it feel like *you are that* character. You cast your own personality onto the character. When the game presents choices where you must decide what to do, it makes the experience even more real. When asked about what immersion means to the other research participants, similar responses are given:

You feel like a real soldier: okay maybe we need to head through this, head through that cover. I'll cover you with covering fire. It feels like a real war combat situation where you have to think how to defeat your enemy. And that immersed me into the game. I kept feeling like I'm fighting really in this war and this battlefield. (Aaron)

Immersion is basically when you feel a part of the game... when you play the game. When you're done playing the game and you go to bed, you dream about the game. That is what I think about immersion there... You just want to play the game, play the game, play the game. And think about the game. And you want to do new things. And when you reach a certain level you restart and do all the same kind of things. But just in a different way... That is what immersion for me is... You want to dive in and really play the game and it feels [as if] you are a part of that world. (Ben)

These two accounts indicate how you are able to live yourself into a game and that it can become a part of your life - even after you have stopped playing it. People start to

form playing habits, and these habits can become a part of their life-world (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2012; Jacobsen, 2009). Consequently, this immersed state can be a powerful motivator for gamers to keep playing. However, immersion can also have an impact on you. As seen in Ben's account, he would dream about the game after spending a lot of time playing it. Zoey also has dreams about the games she played, but for her, the immersion can be so strong that it has a more significant impression on her.

I know when I die I will have to do everything over. And it's almost like real-life. I only have one chance of doing this. And then sometimes I live myself so into it, I get nightmares. Or I just stop playing it because it's too much. Like, in Skyrim, for instance, there was uhm, when I just started playing it, I stumbled into a cave. I don't know how, and there were necromancers. And they were experimenting on the other things in the game. And, although it was only a game, it was so traumatising, because they were literally experimenting on things and the things looked like humans. (Zoey)

When the game creates a more realistic situation, it becomes even more immersive for Zoey; it feels like a real-life situation. Living in that moment becomes so immersive it affects her dreams. Other accounts shared by the participants indicate the potential of games, such as affecting your real-life emotions and thoughts. The following segments of narratives illustrate how playing games can influence you in real-life:

I literally immerse myself with a character. Let's say my character is so hungry and I finally find a tin can of beans in a deserted house on the map... I would be actually happy because my character is surviving. Same goes [for when] there's a firefight. I would be stressed as hell. It's like real-life, you don't [know] if someone's behind you or not. So you would be so paranoid as hell and scared as hell. So... it would feel literally like real-life. (Stephen)

I think where I can see this [immersion] is when sometimes when I'm playing a game, and I'm focusing so hard. Right before I die or right before I kill a few other people in the game, then I can feel my heartbeat actually going up. Just being in that moment... you can't think of anything

around you. Just concentrating on that one thing. So it definitely immerses you in that experience. (Eric)

World of Warcraft, for example. I think where I got it most, I was a Druid at the time. I was feeling like I could shape shift in real-life right now while playing the game... I would say it made me excited... but mostly happy... in the sense of you're losing yourself. You're forgetting about your daily problems. You're just focusing on the game, so nothing else really matters at that moment. You're enjoying yourself, you're being yourself and doing what you love. (David)

Through these accounts, we see that games can affect emotions and thoughts. People live themselves into these gaming characters, but for them, it enhances their gaming experiences. For these players, the realities of their characters become their own, and thus immersion is something that can be linked to *The Social Construction of Reality*. In the last narrative, David expresses that games allow you to forget about your daily problems and that you are able to lose yourself in the game. Therefore, it seems that there can be an aspect of becoming too immersed that you can lose track of reality; causing you to look towards gaming as a means to escape reality.

4.3.2. Choosing games to escape reality

Through immersion, video games allow players to place themselves in the shoes of the character with which they are playing. Participants of the study share stories on how immersion enhances their experiences. It affects their real-life thoughts and emotions, and, in some cases, players admit to feeling like the video game environment feels like real-life. However, when a player starts to prefer the game's reality over their own reality, it can become a form of escaping reality in order to relieve stress and demands of the real world (Clancy et al. 2015).

During the interviews, most participants indicate that they feel a sense of immersion, but that they do not use gaming as a method to escape their own realities. Nevertheless, two participants share their viewpoints on escaping reality and how it can become a part of your life. In Zoey's case, escaping her reality is not because of

how games pull her in, but rather how her home environment pushes her more towards immersing herself into video games.

... When I started playing, there was a lot of stuff happening in my house. My dad was having an affair and everything... And then, it was so easy to just go and play games and then everything is gone. And... then afterwards I would be so sad to return to this, this life. And... so yeah, I think that's the main reason. Because there was bad stuff happening, and then I played and then I feel nice. And afterwards it's so... ugh! ... So then I started comparing [life] to gaming... Because then I'd rather play the whole time and never return to life that's so hard at this moment.
(Zoey)

Zoey's narrative expands on how games are able to give more freedom than her current circumstances. With real-life, she feels restricted and she realises that being able to do the things she wants to – such as travelling and seeing the world – requires money and time. In games, she feels as if she can do anything and go anywhere without requiring money. She seems to be able to manipulate her virtual world in order to receive the most benefit from it. This contrasts sharply with the reality within which she finds herself – a reality that cannot so easily be changed or manipulated. When a person finds themselves in such a reality, they usually seek to escape that reality (Martoncik & Loska, 2016). She shares the idea that, in games, you can run naked and go on adventures with no real-life consequences. Real-life feels boring and in games you can do fantastic and supernatural things – even things such as healing people without medicine.

I like to go to another world and be another person and do things that are fun. Because life is boring. (Zoey)

It is clear that video games do not just allow her to immerse herself into the game characters, but that it also transports her to another world. In this other world, things are more fun and better than her own reality, something that cannot be offered by anything else in her life, such as books or movies.

With gaming, I can put headphones on. I can... be in a different place, hear everything, I can see everything. But with reading, I can still hear

my parents arguing and I can still hear the outside world. And it's sometimes hard to concentrate enough to be able to read and live myself into that world. With gaming, you're just there, you don't have to imagine anything. It's there in front of you and you hear everything... I feel like I'll always be okay. As long as I have games then nothing can get me under.
(Zoey)

Based on the above statement, we can establish that it is possible for a player to use video games as a method to break away from everyday life and reality as literature suggests (Culig, et al. 2013). The second participant to share her experience on how games can offer the chance to escape reality is Emily. In her case, games provide a safe place where she can travel and enter a world with endless possibilities. As with Zoey, Emily's environment influences her to use video games as a means to escape reality. When asked about her experience of gaming and the possibility of using it as a method to escape reality, she answers:

... Definitely, because reality, especially I think for teenagers, isn't that fun. Uhm, because most of the, well not most of the people that play video games, especially as teenagers are those who are quite rejected in social society. They're not popular, they're not whatever. Well, it is, it has kind of shifted. The popular guys are now the gamers.

... I was not popular at all. I was a nobody, but... it wasn't that big a problem for me because our school was just like: get through the day! And then I get home and then I play games and then I'm happy... Throughout high school and throughout most of university that was my safe space. My place I go that's fun because it's somewhere I'm removed from reality into this kind of world where there is endless possibility. (Emily)

In Emily's story, we see that gaming allows her to escape from a reality that was not necessarily bad, but that gaming provided more freedom which allowed her to feel more in control of her situation. Escaping reality often occurs when one compares your own reality with the reality you wish it to be (Clancy, et al. 2015; Martonick & Loksa, 2016). In Zoey's and Emily's cases, games demonstrate a reality which is better than

their own, a reality that they can control and within which they can be free from the restrictions of real-life.

I think also. Especially in most games you play someone that becomes successful or strong, or whatever. And like in this point in my life I'm not really successful or strong or anything like that. So I like that. The character that is me now, is strong and independent and able-bodied... That quality that it has really attracts me. I think... it's more freeing. It feels like the character I play has more reach than I ever could, you know. (Emily)

Escaping into the game's reality can be an alluring aspect and helps a person to forget about his/her current reality. However, for Stephen, escaping reality can be a negative thing. He is of opinion that you should not use games to escape to another place. Rather, you should use games:

... More as a tool of growth and exploration into oneself than anything else. (Stephen)

Games only offer temporary emotions, and these emotions will not stick with you forever. For Stephen, a game does not drive him to play it in order to make his life better. Other participants share that it is important to keep the focus on other things that matter in real life. In Ben's case, his studies and future are too important to lose focus through gaming, and he deliberately tries not to become too immersed into games at this stage in his life. How gaming is a part of a person's life, but more importantly, how a person keeps a balance between games and reality is a facet that is explored in the last main theme of this chapter (cf. section 4.4.1.).

4.3.3. Immersing with gender swapping and morals

One aspect of gaming that charms individuals is the issue of decision-making. When a player is provided with freedom of choice, they will likely feel more motivated to partake in gaming, because the player is not forced into a specific direction (Rapp, Engelmann, Herrmann, & Tomasello, 2017). In role-playing games, players are provided with many kinds of choices. At the start, the first choice is how you want to look. In addition, some games present a choice of gender for the player. Being able to

play the role of a different gender opens opportunities that allow players to encounter unique experiences (Song & Jung, 2015). For some of the male participants, playing as a female character provides a new and unique experience. It is different from what they are used to when games only contain male protagonists. As the literature indicates, females sometime play as a male character to achieve an entirely different outcome – using male avatars to hide their female identity from other people in the online game world (Hussain & Griffiths, 2009). In this section, the aim is to explore the perceptions and motives of gender swapping amongst online gamers and how it enhances the immersive experiences.

It actually felt quite strange. You usually try to build a character closest to you, who resembles you. But when choosing a different gender... it was quite awkward at some stages. Sometimes in the game itself and someone would come up to you and say something as if you're now a girl, a real girl. And for me, it was quite uhm... actually an interesting or funny experience, seeing things happen like that even though I am a man. And even though they know I am a man only playing as a girl character. They would still go out and, yeah. (Eric)

Eric shares his experience of gender swapping by explaining how strange it feels at certain points. People would behave differently towards him and it would not be the same as playing with a male character. Playing as the opposite gender opens opportunities to encounter experiences that can be entirely different from playing as the same gender.

I don't think it's something bad, no, because it's interesting. It's interesting to see how a man would react in a certain situation. If I think of a role-playing game now, of an RPG, yeah. It's interesting because I have done it. I have played a male character just to see how... I don't know, myself as a male character [would] react... Yeah, I don't think it's bad. I just don't like it when... like guys do it on purpose. Like they would then play a female character on World of Warcraft and tell everyone they are a girl. I don't like that. But if you're just interested in, like... seeing... not seeing other people's reactions, and also just experiencing that. I don't think there is anything wrong with it. I think it's quite fun. I think it's

a possibility that games have given us that we didn't usually have.

(Emily)

Through this narrative, Emily paints the picture of how games can deliver a platform for a person to experiment with new experiences that cannot be found in real life. For most of the gamers, playing as a different gender immerses you into different situations with diverse opportunities. Furthermore, certain game characters react differently towards the player based on the choice of gender. In some games, a female character might be able to charm a non-playable character (NPC) into gaining favours, whereas with a male character it would not have been possible.

All my characters are female for some reason. It's just more enjoyable.

Because I see every game it's the same male character, and I don't like that. But I play as female characters because it's more interesting.

(Peter)

Peter shares his sentiment of playing as female characters as a new experience, because in the past, games mostly did not present a choice for the player. Thus, the player had to play as a male character. Being able to play as a different gender provides different experiences to augment the experiences that gaming provides (Hussain & Griffiths, 2009; Song & Jung, 2015). Some players feel that it is easier to relate to a character when that character is the same gender as the player, which in turn makes it easier for the player to become immersed. Aaron and Zoey feel that, because they are members of a certain gender, it is more conceivable to immerse and relate yourself with characters of the same gender.

I think it's easier to relate when a character is a woman... to imagine myself in the game. (Zoey)

In the end, playing as a member of a different gender delivers more opportunities in a game, and for some, it can enrich their immersive experience by role-playing as a different gender. Aaron is the only participant that feels indifferently towards the aspect of gender swapping. He explains that he only plays games to complete it once and then move on to the next gaming experience. Therefore, the first time he plays a game, he would play it as a male because he is a male. Other participants feel that gender

swapping is a normal occurrence in video gaming and that everyone experiments with it.

Gender swapping presents a relatively unproblematic issue to discuss for most participants. Morals, on the other hand, prove not to be such a clear black and white debate, as most moral discourses tend to be. As discussed in the literature review, morals can be seen as how an individual perceives the difference between what is right and wrong (cf. section 2.9.). When a game provides choices between right and wrong, and indicates that these choices have consequences, a player can become immersed and find the experience memorable. Video games remain situated in a virtual environment and in-game consequences have no impact on the real world. Nonetheless, players still project their real-life values onto game choices, similar to the study done by Young and Whitty (2010). When asked if their morals in real-life are portrayed through their gameplay choices, the following accounts are shared:

Yes, because you always have that choice: the good choice or the bad choice. Do you kill this person or do you save them? And I always choose to save the people in games. Even though I would get better armour if I'd sacrifice them, I'd choose to save them. It's just, I don't know why. I feel bad for them. And it's the same in real-life. I won't... okay, it's not that intense, I'm not killing people now. But I'll always try to stay loyal to people in real-life also. And try to be nice and help everyone, instead of just... going off on my own stuff and sacrificing everyone, not caring what happens to them. So yeah, the life and when I'm playing is a lot alike.
(Zoey)

Yes, but not always no. Mostly yes, because I find myself, like I would play a game and I would say like: I will be an evil character now. But I just can't. I can't do it. Like the evil choice will be there like: 'Kill this person'. And it's like: 'No, no, I can't do it'. I don't know, I just can't. Uhm, but not precisely myself, I try to dare, be more daring... I would say in, as a virtual person, if I can say it like that, but I don't really stray too far from my personality. But I think that makes it more immersive. (Emily)

This statement prompts the idea that being true to yourself and playing with genuine intentions leads to a more immersive experience.

Yeah, I think the immersive qualities in the game are more because then I just relate more with her. Because she reacts how I would react. (Emily)

These two players indicate that even though they would sometimes try to make the wrong decisions, their real-life morals would eventually step in and guide them to make the right choices again. However, because morals are something you learn from others (Sigelman & Rider, 2012), different people can react differently in similar situations, i.e. the game environment. With this in mind, participants explain that they are aware of the notion that morals have an influence on their in-game choices. But they know it is only a game, and when you are aware of this, you can allow yourself to experience other aspects of the game which can also be entertaining and immersive.

Morals [are] technically what you grew up with; what you know is right and wrong. In games, I do both ways. I do both evil and good [choices]. It doesn't mean my morals are wrong. If I have the option to kill this person or kill the nation. I will get through the game twice just to see both endings. (Peter)

It depends what type of person I'm playing. If I want to play a dark character I will like, let's say you get the chance to execute someone, then I'm like: yeah, just execute this guy for fun. Because it will entertain me. When I'm playing a good guy game with my morals, then I would be like: 'No, I'm going to save these people, even if I have to go the extra miles to do it.' Yeah, so, but I usually play as a good person. That's where my morals come in play. (Aaron)

Some players are able to put aside their morals in order to endeavour new journeys and discover different experiences. Empathy and immersion seem to play a vital role in how morals influence the players' behaviour in games. Being able to place yourself in others' shoes using intuition allows players to feel bad when conducting harmful actions towards others (even if they are virtual beings) (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2012). When a player cares about the characters in the game, and it feels like a realistic environment, the player will tend to act more accordingly with their morals. Ben and Zoey shared the notion that how a person is raised can be a determining factor. Both come from a conservative family with strong moral views. How they were raised inevitably seeped into their gameplay at some point. Their strong values often seem

to guide them to make the right choice in the game. Emily's following account depicts how being immersed into the game allows your morals to boil over into your gameplay behaviour:

I don't know. I think you become, you are so immersed that you feel sorry for the characters as well. Like the person who is going to be killed. You feel sorry. You don't want them to die. I think morals, morals in life... start to bleed into the virtual world. I think also especially in World of Warcraft. Because it's so... what's the word... it's so like life in a way. Because the people running around there is an actual person running around. If you're gonna attack him you're attacking him. So, it kind of feels like the morals bleed into it.

(Guilt feelings can also emerge after doing something bad)

... Yeah definitely, I do, I do, I do. When I do stuff, like I have to make difficult decisions in Mass Effect, I feel guilty if I kill a race. Like I find myself a lot of the time when I'm playing games like that. That I find myself like saying to myself: 'This is just a game. Turn it off and just go do something.' Like I become, I find that I become too immersed sometimes. That this becomes my life, this decision. And I don't know what decision to make. And then I just feel like I have to take a step back because it just becomes too intense for me. (Emily)

In this theme, immersion is explored to gain insight into how gaming can influence our social construction of reality. When a player becomes immersed, they step into the world of the game, creating new and unique lived experiences just as they would have done in the real world. Because of this aspect, players feel that games can offer a lot more than just socialising with others and being competitive. Immersion requires a player to question the standards of society and to allow them to experiment with established societal constructs. However, in games, you can become anyone you want to be and do anything you want to. We can start to see why gaming can become such a large part of somebody's life. Yet, it is still necessary to embark further into how online gaming and video gaming influence a player.

4.4. The everyday life of online gamers

4.4.1. Gaming and everyday life

The final theme of this chapter investigates how online gaming becomes a part of the respondents' daily lives. Throughout this section, attention is on how gaming is a part of the players' life-worlds and how video gaming influences their real lives (Jacobsen, 2009). Furthermore, this theme explores how participants view themselves and how gaming impacts on their identities and personalities.

I explore how gamers become involved with video games and online gaming. In addition, we try to understand what drives participants to partake in gaming and to gain insight into how gaming can influence their construction of reality. The aim is to explore a participant's perspectives in order to see how they view gaming as a part of their life and how it influences them. For most of the research participants, gaming has become a part of their routine and it is something they do daily, making it a part of their habitus (Inglis & Thorpe, 2012; Jacobsen 2009).

When I come home from work, or from the studio... because what my work also involves art, obviously, and art making so for me... When I get home that's what I do. I play a game. Because that's my [life]. That's the best way of relaxing and just like (makes a sigh of relief) ... And then you get transported.

After a day of work, Emily comes home to unwind. Gaming is her method for relaxing. It is also something she does to socialise with her boyfriend and friends during the week. Zoey complements this segment by explaining that she also uses gaming to maintain a connection with her boyfriend. Her boyfriend lives far away from her; thus, gaming is a part of her daily routine in order to interact with him. Consequently, gaming helps Zoey to cope with daily stresses and to socialise with her friends.

I craft my life around it. (Stephen)

In this narrative, Stephen states that gaming is an important aspect of his life. He wishes to keep it a part in as many aspects as possible. He emphasises that it is important to keep a balance between other facets of his life, but that he tries to include gaming in most parts of it. He incorporates gaming into his life by socialising with

friends and by creating a gaming business. Stephen elaborates further that gaming can become such an intricate part of daily interactions that it has influenced his culture. Gaming plays a role in how he speaks and he uses phrases linked with gaming to communicate and socialise with his gaming friends.

Peter posits that it is hard to explain how much gaming is a part of his life because it is difficult to use contemporary terminology to describe an ever-developing phenomenon.

It's starting to evolve and stuff. And you can't use the same words you use for other stuff for this. It's a whole new channel of thinking. (Peter)

He explains that gaming is an ever-changing phenomenon which will continue to evolve. For him, it is a part of his life because it was something fun to do at home when he was younger and bored. Over time it became a hobby and he became more interested in it. Aaron expresses that gaming is a part of his life, because it helps him to relax and socialise with his friends as well. It has trickled into his daily interactions with other people.

I've become a nerd... It's something that I like to talk about with people. I like to share my gaming experience... I like to have conversations about it. (Aaron)

Others seek to continue building on their gaming lives and include it into more of their life-aspects. However, for some, it is more important to focus on other things in life. Ben illustrates that, even though gaming is a big part of his life, he intends to complete his studies first and develop a career before he returns to making gaming a big part of his life.

... A few years back it was a very big part of my life, because it was the biggest hobby. It's like it was my sport... I was basically living online. Currently, I'm not so much playing games. I'm more just trying to sort my life out. Just getting all the building blocks together at the right place. Because I don't want to make a stupid mistake and then having lived my regret... There's always a space for it... I like having a diverse life. I love having different things and stuff. I don't want to go in my small box. I want to experience a lot of things. I think if this current semester is over,

I will play a lot again, like when it's holiday. I'm going to play a lot, and just sit on my PC not going out. At least it's a cheaper option. (Ben)

Although Ben would like to fully engage in gaming, he is aware of his responsibilities and that it is impossible to play games the whole day. Keeping a balance between gaming and other facets of life is something that participants are aware of. Being enrolled at the University of the Free State, participants all agree that it is important to focus on their studies and that, although gaming is an important part of their lives, developing a career and becoming successful is more important.

Stephen shares his method for keeping a balanced life by relying on his strong values. He continues that a person should value the life which they are living. He focuses on what is important in his life and strives to achieve it; being happy, having good health, and growing as a person; emotionally, cognitively, and physically. Maslow's self-actualising person is a theory that has a strong impact on the decisions Stephen makes. By striving to reach his true potential, Stephen knows he should give attention to all parts of his life (Meyer, Moore, & Viljoen, 2010: 338). When something does not help him to become the person he wants to be, he would remove himself from that situation. Even though he is very passionate about gaming in general, he recognises that he needs to earn money to develop his passion further. Overall, Stephen wishes to live a full life and be a healthy person so that he can enjoy gaming for a very long time (cf. section 1.7.).

Keeping the balance between gaming and life is something that is important for the gamers. Even though it is something that is fun to do – which they are passionate about – players show interest in other hobbies and activities in their lives. Peter shares his devotion for cooking and enjoying food. He also finds it crucial to take constant breaks between gaming sessions by standing up and moving around. Aaron explains that if it was impossible to continue gaming that he would still be able to adapt to the situation and find something else to become passionate about. Eric voices how, throughout his life, he has attempted not to become too involved in gaming.

I know there was also sometimes we used to listen to motivational speeches and time management... There was also a time I tried to restrict myself from gaming rather... Doing something more productive

with my time. So I restricted myself in a way also. But there was always some time for gaming as well. (Eric)

Eric clarifies that he feels that gaming can be a very time-consuming activity and that one should be careful not to become too invested in it. For Zoey, gaming has always been more of a casual hobby. She will not allow herself to be consumed by it. Additionally, she spends time reading and exercising whenever possible. In the case of Ben, he realised that he should maintain a balance between gaming and his life, however, he understands that if he wants to become a professional player and makes a living out of gaming, he will have to sacrifice a lot of his time and other aspects of his life.

It feels like I have reached my point of skill... I can't actually improve without taking away something out from my life. So I am trying to balance my social life, my academic life, as well as my gaming life. (Ben)

As a result, gaming can become a large part of your daily life, but it is important to maintain a balance between various aspects of your life. However, participants' narratives reveal that gaming can indeed change how you behave in the real world and interact with other people. For most research members, gaming has a positive impact on their lives. It helps them to develop interpersonal skills as well as other cognitive skills which they can use in their daily lives. Playing games helps Stephen to deal with frustrations in real-life and to better cope with daily hassles.

I also learned a little bit more stress management and how to speak to people. I realised that I always sounded nervous when I spoke to people, maybe because I didn't know what to expect from them. (Stephen)

In online games, players need to work together to complete objectives, and to achieve this, players need to communicate with each other (Badrinarayanan, Sierra, & Martin, 2015; Bardrinarayanan, Sierra, & Taute, 2014). A surprising result for some players was that gaming helped them in real-life scenarios. It helped David to become more social with other people and to better communicate with them. It also helped him to become a better team player. Ben expresses that gaming has helped him to adapt to situations and to learn things he would not have been able to learn by himself.

One main thing I've taken away from gaming is the ability to learn and to study from someone else.

... And that same thing I can actually now do in real-life... If I struggle with something I can actually do the research to know how to do the certain thing. (Ben)

Where gaming helps others to adapt to their environments, it helps Zoey to become more joyful and see the fun side of life.

... it made me a less serious person. I was a serious child. Never laughed, I never just. Or well, I would do jokes, but it wasn't as funny. And I think it's because of the stuff happening in my house. And I was always so sad and everything. And then with gaming, I just saw everything isn't that serious or life isn't that serious. And there are other things to think about, and there's this fun side. So, I think it made me a more, a better person almost. Or a person who... 'om makliker mee oor die weg te kom' (to get along with easier). I mean no one wants the serious person there the whole time. At least now I have a humouristic side. So, the thing is, it changed my life quite a lot.

4.4.2. Online gaming and identity

This theme paints the picture of how players see gaming as a part of their lives and how they view the importance of maintaining a balance between gaming and other aspects in their lives. Participants also share how gaming made significant impacts on their lives, and in some cases, changed them to become better people. The focus now shifts to investigating whether gaming influences a person's identity and whether it leaves an impression on how gamers classify themselves.

Partaking in online gaming can play a role in how you portray yourself to others and how you view people you come across. The social identity, discussed in chapter 2, of a person steps in and determines whether they see themselves as a part of the gaming community or as a separate person (cf. section 2.3.). When Emily meets someone, gaming influences her interactions with that person and how she represents herself.

[It] is something that then we know we have in common. And that for me is a big thing to have in common with someone. It was one of the first questions I asked my boyfriend when I met him, is this: do you watch anime (a style of Japanese film and television animation, typically aimed at adults as well as children)? What's your favourite anime? Do you play games? What's your favourite game? That is like one of my, I would say, ten questions you would ask someone you just met. Because that is a really specific way of getting to know someone very quickly. Because then you know: okay, this person plays games. And then, games also for me involve a certain thought process and a certain way of thinking, a certain way of being. (Emily)

In Emily's words, we see that gaming can be something that becomes a part of you. It influences your way of being; how you see yourself and other people. Peter sees gaming as something that is a part of his identity. But he seems to go wider: to see technology as a part of his identity, not just gaming itself. He loves technology and reads up on all sorts of modern technology. But for him, the social impact of technology can be a negative thing. Peter hates socialising and interacting with a screen. He strongly prefers connecting with people directly. In such cases, when interacting with people directly, he does not disclose himself as a gamer at first. His identity encompasses a range of different things.

I never went like: 'What do you do? I'm a gamer and stuff'... I just go: 'I'm an I.T. student. I play games in my off times. I watch anime and series.' And then we talk about that stuff. (Peter)

Peter does not solely identify himself as a gamer. For him, identifying as a gamer means something else in the past, and that presently a lot of people call themselves gamers. Hence, in Peter's eyes, most gamers do not fit the criteria he used to identify himself with.

... That term is kind of dead now because everyone can be now a gamer... Gamers can be someone who's on the phone the whole day with a game... So it's no more a terminology you can use for somebody that's focused on it. (Peter)

Peter explains that gaming used to be a unique classification for people that were very passionate about it. Nowadays, anybody can become a gamer, and for him, it feels like it divides people more than it brings them together. People now classify themselves in many distinct categories instead of just seeing themselves as a gamer (Gabbiadini, et al. 2014). Nevertheless, most participants identify as gamers because they see it as something they love doing and that they spend various amounts of time on. In general, participants admit that gaming is a part of their identities, but that they would rather classify themselves as people with several interests and personal traits that make them unique.

I consider myself as a gamer. But I also want to consider myself personally as a person with a balanced lifestyle... Gaming is my hobby. I really wanted to do it for a job, but if you weigh the pros and the cons... it's not worth the sacrifice. So I want to see myself as the balanced guy that does gaming for a hobby... and helping other people. But not just casual gaming... playing for hours a day. (Ben)

I'm a bit of everything, I guess. I can't classify myself as one. Because I have so many great loves if I can say it like that. I have my love of gaming, but I also have my love of art and my love of anime. Like anime is also a very big part of my life. So, I can't just... like, go to one. (Emily)

If I don't have to compare myself then I will classify myself as a gamer because I really like it, and I do it a lot. When I have free time I play games. I don't read. It's first games, if the power's out then I read. So, yeah, then I'll classify myself as a gamer. (Zoey)

Throughout these narratives, participants exemplify that they do see themselves as gamers, but that it is not the core identity that stands out when they think about themselves. If you allow it, gaming can become a large part of your life and filter into your identity. For some players, games can have an influence on their personality as well. However, players compliment literature that suggests that it is more likely that their personality influences their behaviour in games and the life choices they make which relate to gaming (Park & Lee, 2012). Most participants would agree that their personality in real-life seeps over into their actions in games. If you are an introverted person in real-life you would be introverted in games too (Park & Lee, 2012). You

would not approach people in the online world and try to befriend them. Aaron suggests that competitive personalities are also portrayed through their gameplay behaviour. Ordinarily, personality does play a key role in games, but Zoey's following account represents how personality can influence one's game behaviour:

I think it influences the games you choose... And if you have a very dominating personality, I think you'll have, you'll want a dominating character. You'll want to be the biggest character there is. You'll still want to dominate everyone there. And when you have a more chilled personality you won't need that. You'll just be fine with everything... or any game. And I think dominating people will also rather choose competitive games than only offline RPGs or something, yeah RPGs... And some people have... like a personality that doesn't walk over people. They would maybe then with gaming take the biggest character and then... (Zoey)

Interviewer's interjection: So the opposite might be true as well?

Yeah, be the opposite that they are. If they can't be this in real-life they'll be it in games. (Zoey)

Personality can have an influence on which games you choose to play and how you behave in those games. In this chapter, we explored the lived experiences of participants in relation to their individual narratives of video gaming and online gaming. The following chapter related to presenting the findings focuses more on the participants' narratives on how they perceive the whole of the online gaming community and whether they feel a sense of belonging towards this community.

Chapter 5: A sense of belonging within online gaming communities

In the first analysis chapter (Chapter 4: Lived experiences of online gamers), an in-depth exploration and investigation are conducted on the lived experiences of online gamers. The central focus is on the individual experiences surrounding the players' life-worlds. With participants' viewpoints, I explore how they become involved with online gaming (cf. section 4.1.) and the driving forces that motivate gamers to play online games (cf. section 4.2). The chapter also examines how players become immersed into the virtual reality of video games and how this sense of immersion influences their construction of reality (cf. section 4.3.). Lastly, the chapter inspects how online gaming becomes a part of the players' daily life and how it influences their identities (cf. section 4.4.).

In this chapter, the focus shifts towards the gamers' experiences within larger online video game communities and whether they feel a sense of belonging towards these communities. However, before proceeding with whether online gamers feel a connection with their fellow gamers, it is important to explore the perceptions players have towards each other. The first theme of this chapter, thus, centres around the perceptions gamers have towards other gamers and their perceptions towards online gaming communities. This theme also explores the perceptions and experiences of players relating to stereotypes in online gaming.

5.1. Perceptions and stereotypes surrounding online gamers

5.1.1. Perceptions towards other gamers

People's perception of others influences the interactions between them and impacts on whether a person wants to become a part of a group (Baumeister & Bushman, 2011). If an online gamer has a negative view of other gamers, they will avoid becoming a part of online gaming communities. Therefore, it is essential to inquire how participants view themselves and other gamers. These perceptions provide insight into online gamers' interest about seeking a sense of belonging in online communities.

Throughout the interviews, various perceptions of online gamers are given. Firstly, research participants state that they see online gamers as persons similar to themselves. But these viewpoints differ depending on the environments within which they interact with each other. When players meet each other in person, participants express a positive experience. When a gamer meets another person, who plays video games, in person, the interaction is a more enriching experience. Having a unique interest in common sparks up a joint interest between them – which usually stirs up a conversation about games. However, when participants discuss their perceptions of other gamers within the online environment, these discussions convey mostly negative experiences. One participant expresses that he generally despises other players in online communities. If Peter is unable to play online with his friends, he would rather not play at all.

I hate the people. I hate online people, they are all so assholes. (Peter)

He explains further that he feels most people judge and criticise you if you do something wrong. According to Peter, it is because of the competitive nature of online gaming (cf. section 4.2.2.). People want to be the best, and that causes selfish behaviour. Players refuse to work together, even though online games are usually reliant on teamwork (Fuster, et al. 2014). Peter admits that there are decent people online, but he feels that the chance of meeting them are very slim. In the end, Peter developed a routine of joining an online game and muting all other players instantly; avoiding any communication. Peter's attitude might be on the extreme pole of having a negative outlook towards other players, but he is not the only one who views the strangers of the online world in such a light.

Usually I think they're just arrogant and cowards. Because not all of them, but most of them. Because they don't say those things to me in real-life. And then I just get so angry because it's so unnecessary to say all those things and some of them are really... like overconfident. They really think they are the best. They have huge egos... At the beginning when I just started playing Overwatch I liked all of them. I thought: 'Wow, it's the best thing ever playing with all these random people'. And the longer I played the less I liked them. (Zoey)

Zoey's statement expands on Peter's experience about the negative and competitive attitude players have in online games. The reason people are like that, according to them, is because of the anonymity in games. This corresponds with observations in studies done on anonymity within online environments (Barlett & Gentile, 2016; Zimmerman & Ybarra, 2016). People know that there will not be consequences for their actions, and they behave in undesirable ways. Yet, when Zoey meets people in person, it can have a different outcome than in the virtual environment.

... With some guys if that's the first thing they say. My perception would be negative. Then I'm like: 'Are you trying to prove something? Are you trying to be better than me because you're now a gamer?' But if it's like someone... we've talked a bit. And then they just mention: 'Yeah, I play games'. Then it would be nice. Because: 'Wow, we have something in common'. And then we'll start talking about what types of games you play and if it's the same ones that I play. Then I'm really excited. And then I'm like: 'Wow, this is a cool person'. So, it depends on the situations. (Zoey)

When gamers meet other gamers in person, it is a different story than playing with random strangers on the internet. In most cases, when players meet each other in person, it is a more meaningful encounter than meeting a person who does not play games. David states that he perceives other gamers as “*normal people on the street*”. However, when he starts to interact with them and finds out they are gamers, he thinks more of them, because now they have something in common. This is the case with several of the other participants. They see other gamers as people just like them, and because they share a common interest, it is easier to get along with them.

Well mostly for me. I feel like they're likeminded people so I like them (laughs). I think they... it differs. There are a lot of bullies online. But there are also a lot of fun people online. So, my usual perception of them is someone that is... social, and also just wants to have fun. There are obviously the cases with the rage quitters and the angry old people screaming. (Emily)

Emily's account builds on the viewpoint of online gamers being the same as one another. She continues that people can get along with each other, but also have

negative experiences. Conversely, studies show that there are different types of people in online gaming communities, and what a player chooses to focus on can influence their experience (Clarke, 2013; Tu, et al. 2015: 159). Eric sums up the different kinds of people that a person might encounter in the online environment:

... There's quite a few different people I've noticed. And most of them are the same. You get people that actually try to help you. Or they would speak to you and motivate you, maybe. Or try and get the team together. There's always that person... There are people that sometimes when they have a laggy (slow/bad internet) connection or whatever and their game didn't go so well. They'd go out of their way to make the game bad for everyone, just because their game wasn't so good. Sometimes you get... I don't know. You get those people who are always quiet. You try to interact with them, but they just go on and play their own game. So, there are a few different kinds of people I've noticed online. And mostly you can categorise them in different, or only in a few different stages.
(Eric)

In Eric's narrative, he identifies different types of gamers. In conjunction with the other participants' accounts, we are able to see that our perceptions of other people can lead to unique experiences. However, before moving towards how players feel a sense of belonging in online gaming communities, it is important to explore the general stereotypes that exist relating to online gamers. Throughout the statements of the players, it seems that even though participants classify themselves as gamers, they place other gamers in categories. During the interviews, the perceptions of stereotypes towards gamers are explored and how it impacts their daily lives. As seen in the literature, stereotypes can have negative effects on people, and cause a person to flee to a more safe and secure place (Sigelman & Rider, 2012; Stewart & Zaaïman, 2015: 143; cf. section 2.8.3.); such as online games. In the next section, the aim is to focus on the perceptions of stereotypes against online gamers, and whether it can be a factor that pushes a player more towards gaming; in turn making them, feel more like a part of gaming communities rather than non-gaming communities.

5.1.2. Stereotypes towards online gamers

In chapter 2, an investigation is undertaken to explore existing stereotypes against online gamers (cf. section 2.8.3.). "Stereotyping refers to people's tendency to oversimplify or severely limit our perception of other social groups" (Stewart & Zaaïman, 2015: 143). Stereotyping leads people to make generalisations and assumptions about a specific group, which can be positive or negative. People tend to falsely judge things they do not understand. Individuals who do not partake in online gaming often misunderstand the enriching experience it can provide a player. While the focus of this dissertation is to explore the lived experiences of online gamers and their sense of belonging towards online communities, it does, in part, aim to increase awareness of the negative experiences players face. There are many stereotypes that arose during the literature review. Some stereotypes towards video gamers remained in the past, but many still exist (cf. section 2.8.3.). Throughout this section, we explore the perceptions of the research participants towards existing stereotypes that they have encountered throughout their lives, as well as their attitudes towards these stereotypes.

I think people think they (gamers) are very anti-social and they don't have any social skills. And... I think people think they aren't interesting actually... Where I find gamers are the most interesting. And people don't think they are intelligent. I find gamers are the most interesting and the most intelligent people there are... That's what I see. The people around me. The people I see and hear playing games are not only 12-year-old boys sitting at home screaming at everyone. But accomplished people like doctors and dentists and lawyers who play games and enjoy it. And intellectuals. I find I have the most interesting conversations with gamers. Because they just... I think also their outlook is different and it might be because of games. (Emily)

Emily paints a picture of a world within which people see gamers as individuals who avoid social contact and prefer to play games over human interaction. A world which rationalises that people who play games are unable to be stimulated by video games. In her experience, games make it possible for her to have thought-provoking

conversations and encounter tales that she would not have been able to come across with non-gamers. In most cases, participants share that they feel people categorise gamers as introverted people who do not have good social skills. Stephen elaborates on this notion:

... People only see the most extreme examples of gamers and associate other gamers with them. (Stephen)

In Stephen's life, he has only met one stereotypical gamer that he would classify as a "nerdy type of gamer". Stephen makes use of the word "schizoid" when he thinks of how other people view gamers. Schizoid personality disorder refers to a person with "a pattern of detachment from social relationships and a limited range of emotions in interpersonal situations. They seem aloof, cold, and indifferent to other people" (Barlow & Durand, 2015: 449-450). According to Stephen, people see gamers as loners who do not interact with other persons and prefer to be alone. Khanolkar and McLean (2012) argue that gamers are, therefore, seen as socially isolated individuals.

A stereotype that players have faced is that playing video games is a large waste of time and money. However, Peter points out that:

... If you waste time doing what you like, then it's not really wasting time, is it? (Peter)

David experiences even more negative stereotypes in his life. People would come up to him and exclaim:

... what the hell is wrong with you, why are you playing video games so much? It does nothing for your life! You're a loser! That's why you're fat! (David)

In addition, even gamers would have stereotypical views of each other. Zoey explains that male gamers would stereotype towards female gamers with ideas that females who play games are lesbians. Consequently, there are various stereotypes against gamers today, but most players would agree that the stereotypes are starting to fade away. When participants are questioned about the stigma of violent video games causing violent behaviour, all the research participants feel that this stereotype is false and was more relevant in the past.

Saying like games cause violence is actually one of the most stupidest things I've ever heard. (Aaron)

Aaron takes a strong position against this stereotype. For him, gaming has no more of an behavioural influence than television or other media. He continues that it is society that creates violence instead of video games.

I think because I play games it makes me less prone to shoot people... Because sometimes I think I want to shoot people. But then I play a game and get all my frustrations out. It's like: 'Oh my gosh, it feels so good!' ... Just getting it all out on the game and not doing it in real-life. So, I think, yeah, games relieve a lot of my frustrations I have. (Aaron)

Ben agrees that violent video games do not necessarily cause violent behaviour. He expresses that it is more because of the competitive nature in humans that they behave aggressively, as supported in the literature of Fuster, et al. (2014). Ben continues that if you look at people playing sport, such as tennis, people smash their tennis rackets on the court in anger because they lost. Thus, Ben points out that competitiveness can be the driving force for violence and that violence has always been a part of our lives. On the other hand, Emily proposes that gaming does not cause violence, but that it can have an influence on a person, depending on the age of the person.

I think it depends on how old the person is playing the violent video games. You can't have like a 12-year-old or a 10-year-old playing those types of games. Because it instils into them a certain like: 'This is how you solve a problem. You shoot people'. But when someone is of age, like the proper age restriction that the game has. They that play the game, the game also has an age restriction for a reason. Because a person that is 18 will be able to reason that there are other ways to handle a situation rather than shooting everyone. So, I don't think so. I think it's more people playing the games irresponsibly. Someone that is playing the game that is too young for it... I really agree with gaming like age restrictions, because they are there for a reason. Just like films have age restrictions. Because there are certain things shown to you that a child would just suck up like a sponge to accept as fact. Where someone

who is older would know that this is. This is not fact. This is something that is fantasy or something that would not work in reality. (Emily)

According to Emily, violent video games can have an influence on a person if the person is underage. However, playing games responsibly will not affect your behaviour and cause you to be violent. Participants feel that this is a stereotype that comes from older generations when video games were not understood well. Moreover, participants feel that, in general, stereotypes do not have such a large impact on their lives. Even though people see them as individuals with low social skills or that gaming is a waste of time, participants state that they could cope and enjoy the gaming experience nonetheless.

I don't really feel affected by any of them. I don't really care what other people say about it. So, I'm quite neutral when it comes to stereotyping with gamers. (Eric)

Eric's account sums up the views of the participants. Because stereotypes are no longer such a significant part of their life-worlds, participants' emotions towards stereotypes are starting to become less apparent. Yet, some participants feel that something should still be done to ensure people do not see gamers in a negative light.

The only thing I can do is by being a role model of gaming and by being that responsible gamer who shows what it actually is to be a gamer. (Stephen)

Stephen feels that it is wrong to create stereotypes against people, but that it is unnecessary to try and educate people about it. Gamers should rather set good examples for other people and younger gamers in particular, in order to prove these stereotypes wrong. Emily feels the same about stereotypes. They will fade away and it is mostly a small group of people who created them in the first place.

I think it's a case of a very small minority who's just banging the loudest. Like an empty bottle banging the loudest. (Emily)

5.2. A sense of belonging in online gaming

5.2.1. Feeling a sense of belonging

The previous theme focuses on the perceptions of online gamers towards other gamers, and how stereotypes can affect their daily lives. In this theme, the aim is to explore whether participants feel a sense of connection with the online community and how it relates to their perceptions of other online gamers. In this dissertation, a sense of belonging is conceptualised as feeling a connectedness with the community (Carpiano & Hystad, 2011), and feeling that this community is supportive towards its members (Le, et al. 2016). The four key components of a sense of belonging, explored in chapter 2 (cf. section 2.6.1.) are repeated here briefly: membership, influence (a member's contributions matter and their actions make a difference in the community), integration/fulfilment of needs (a member is considered as a valuable asset who's needs are important), and sharing of emotional connections (members are able to share history, common places and similar experiences).

Feeling like a part of the online gaming community is something that is highly subjective, according to participants of this study. For some players, it is possible to instantly feel a sense of belonging upon entering a random community, and they find it easy to become friends with strangers. Other participants explain that they feel a sense of connection with the online community, but that this connection is something they only share with their real-life friends. If they play an online game on their own, they do not really feel a part of the community without their friends at their sides. Lastly, it is also possible for players to feel no sense of connection with the community at all and, for some, it is only possible to feel a part of a group if the members of the group are your friends.

One of the research participants, Stephen, states that he feels there is a sense of connection in online gaming communities. He tends to speak with other people on community forums and he has made a friend that lives in Belgium through being active in the community. He elaborates by saying that when a community is moderated well by administrators, the experience can be a positive one and can lead to interesting interactions.

When I join the group in a game... it's especially to get a sense of community. More than anything else. (Stephen)

According to Stephen, people want to become a part of a group, and for him, joining gaming groups is similar to the reason why people attend church, namely to feel like they are a part of something rather than being alone. According to Carpiano and Hystad (2011), the components that stand out in Stephen's narrative are membership and integration/fulfilment of needs. For him, gamers want to be a part of the group and become members that are active and engaging with each other. David expresses that it is easier for him to become a part of gaming communities than to become a part of social groups in real-life. He says that he is able to make friends in gaming communities easily and has made close friendships because of online gaming.

Other than the friends I've already made, I'm still busy crafting new relationships on a day to day basis... I really enjoy meeting people. Obviously, I wouldn't go out on a limb, meeting a complete stranger on my own. (David)

David feels a sense of belonging, depicted by Carpiano and Hystad (2011), by being able to make friends and have an emotional connection with them. With other participants, there is a sense of feeling like a part of the gaming community, but that caution needs to be taken when entering these communities. Emily clarifies that it is possible to feel like a part of the community, but that you should not blindly trust and befriend everyone you meet online.

... It can be with strangers. I think it takes longer with strangers, but definitely it can be with strangers. Obviously, there's threats and people who lie. I see most of these people I've met online who said they're a girl are not [or rather] that's just a guess. So, there wasn't a specific occurrence... I think a lot of people who play online games are guys pretending to be girls just to get stuff (laughs). But I did make a very good friend. A guy who lives in P.E. over World of Warcraft. And I think the big thing is, it takes longer because you are quite cautious. You don't want to just say your real name online and stuff like that. But it takes longer, but then also there's a reward in it. You gain friends which you never

would have met in real-life. Which also has a certain fun quality... It's a good experience. (Emily)

For Emily, online gaming provides an experience which she cannot find in the real world. Online gaming offers her opportunities to befriend strangers online which she would not have met in real-life. It also allows her to feel like she is a part of something when she is at home alone. Being able to log into a game and play with other people makes her feel like she is a part of something. It is also a way to remain connected with her boyfriend when they are not able to see each other.

I live alone. When I speak to people online, when I'm playing at night or so, it just, it feels nice. Because I don't feel that alone. Not that I'm lonely per se. But just like, for that day I didn't really talk to much people or stuff like that. It's just fun to... socialise then. Such like I had a social encounter and to me it feels like my needs are definitely being met. Because then I can actually have conversations with my boyfriend. Where I only speak to him once a week maybe. I can talk to him more, and actually just... be around. Because you don't always when you're playing online games with people talk the whole time. But you're just... doing the same thing together and that is also, that is a social act which is also fun. (Emily)

In Emily's account, we see that she feels she is a part of the community through how the community is able to fulfil her social needs as well as her need to have emotional connections with her friends and boyfriend. Thus, two of Carpiano & Hystad's (2011) components of a sense of belonging are being fulfilled in Emily's narrative. Consequently, it is possible to feel part of online communities for some of the gamers. Aaron relates that being a part of gaming communities help you to feel a sense of belonging outside the virtual world as well. When meeting strangers, who play games too, you feel already a sense of connection with them; that you would be able to become friends with them and play online together. However, Eric's impression of a sense of belonging with online communities is not how he expected it to be when he started playing online games.

... When I started playing online... I always saw other people knowing each other, playing together. When I started playing like World of

Warcraft. It felt to me like most of the time I'm alone, doing my own thing. Sometimes I'd try to pair or get a group to play with me. But sometimes it can be that they're actually rude as well. So, it kind of makes you feel distant. But for the most [part], I didn't communicate that much with people. When you do, it's only a quick conversation and then you go on and forget about it. Or sometimes someone teaches you something. I can remember most of the things I know now from online gaming is people who taught me from the online games. But I can't mention one of them, because I don't know any of them at this moment. So, but as a whole I think the sense of connectedness, everyone playing together, is a good experience. (Eric)

Eric's narrative portrays the image of a community that interacts with each other, but that it is mostly on a superficial level. People talk and play with each other, but, for him, the community does not make an effort to include new members and make them feel like a crucial part of the community as observed in the literature (cf. Section 2.6.1.). The result is that Eric does not actually feel a part of the community. For him, a sense of connection is only possible with your real-life friends with whom you play online.

There's not such a big sense of connectedness. Only with people you usually play with. When you play with new people you don't know and you play with new people every day – the more you play with different kind of people, the less the sense of connectedness feels actually. Because it's actually such a large community and you can't get connected to each and every one of them. So, sometimes you just missed someone or you don't really acknowledge or see someone. But there are definitely cases where you feel connected when you meet a specific person or someone that amazed you in the game or there's always a sense of connectedness, but not as large as I would've thought it would be. (Eric)

Although it is possible to feel a sense of connectedness in the online community, Eric explains that the community is large. According to several studies, large numbers of people can play at the same time (Badrinarayanan, Sierra & Taute, 2014; Billieux, et al. 2013), and makes it difficult to start a relationship with someone. Aaron supports

this notion by elaborating that it is hard to have a sense of community. Because players come and go fast during online games and you never get to know people in a game. You may play on the same team in one game and then play against each other in the next game. The time to get to know a person is, thus, not sufficient to begin a new friendship. It is consequently the reason why Zoey does not feel a strong sense of belonging with the online gaming community.

... No not really. Not people I don't know. The people I know that's beside me when playing, I feel a connection with them. It's like a bonding experience playing together, winning this game together. But other people. I don't know... I never feel a connection with them. Because I know: the next match I'll never see them again. Or I'll never see them again any match. Because they're not from around here and I can't contact them and say: 'Okay, well, why don't we play this now'. Well, I can but it won't help, because I'll never see them in real-life. I like to meet the people I play with. So, no, not really, I don't feel a connection. (Zoey)

Studies suggest that the presence of anonymity influences a player's choice to interact with strangers online (Barlett & Gentile, 2016; Zimmerman & Ybarra, 2016). If you do not know the person behind the avatar, it becomes a lot harder to accept that what this person is telling is the truth and then become friends, never having met in real-life. Zoey builds on this idea of not being able to instantly trust someone you meet online:

Because you don't know the person and you don't know the face. You don't even know their real name. It's just a name on a character that's made up. And then... I don't know. For me it's scary, because then it could be anyone. It could be this creepy old guy sitting there naked, or it could be this... 12-year-old boy playing... It could be anyone and I don't know if I'll like that person. So, that's why I don't invite them. And I think, personally I think people don't invite me because I'm not the best player. But maybe it's the same for them. Maybe they only like to invite players they know. (Zoey)

Not knowing who the person is with whom you are interacting in online gaming can cause players to feel no connection at all with the community. Anonymity seeps in again when players feel no need to make connections with the community. The

literature argues that players would rather do what they want and behave negatively than establish connections with other players. (Barlett & Gentile, 2016; Zimmerman & Ybarra, 2016). Players feel that they have no real influence in the community and that people do not want to make helpful contributions. Thus, certain components of a sense of belonging are not fulfilled for some of the research participants (cf. section 2.6.1. on components of a sense of belonging) – making it impossible for some players to feel a sense of connectedness or be able to share emotional connections with other players.

If you are online and know nobody knows who you are, you can do what you want. (Peter)

For Peter, it feels as if most people online are there to behave selfishly and create a negative experience for everybody involved.

I haven't found an online game yet where the community was not trash and hates everyone that comes into it.

I feel no connection with other people... I mute everyone when I get into a game. I mute the chat in the game. I don't care about anyone else, because I know it's gonna... most people are going to fight. (Peter)

In Peter's eyes, most players in the online world seem to be interested in making your gaming experience negative. He no longer tries to interact with strangers online because of his past experiences where people just fight with each other and bully each other. Ben supports the narrative of Peter, but elaborates that it might be a South African thing.

I don't feel actually a good connection with the competitive and also the general community of South Africa. If you play the games you know... most of South Africans are actually salty (negative, agitated, angry) type of players who are not actually people with good manners or good internet etiquette and that type of stuff. (Ben)

Throughout these narratives, a picture is created of a community that can be dynamic and allow for unique experiences. After exploring whether players feel a sense of belonging towards the online gaming community, the interviews moved towards how

participants feel about the sense of connections, or lack thereof. Stephen feels more positive about the ability to create connections in the gaming community. For him, you are able to become friends by playing together and then following each other on social media, investing time into the friendships over a period. He sees gaming communities in a more positive light and emphasises that it is the responsibility of gaming companies and developers to regulate good behaviour within their games.

Gaming communities can also be a place where you can learn from other players. When Aaron is interested in a game, he would join social media groups related to that game to learn more about it and in turn learn more about the people in the community. This relates to literature suggesting gamers joining communities outside of the game's virtual environment (cf. section 2.5.3.). It is the same for Ben with regards to the notion that there will at least always be one person that is prepared to help new players or anyone that requires help.

There is always people willing to help. Never has it occurred to me when I had to ask a person for help that no one just... everyone just ignored me. That's the nice thing about certain communities being so big. There's always a helping person out there... and you as well can help... I see this a lot where just a random person... nobody knows him, but he can have try outs with the team. And you play together and then you can have fun. (Ben)

Eric builds on Ben's narrative through explaining that he likes the aspect of people helping each other in games and he also likes to help other people when he sees that they are struggling. For him, a community grows more together when people are helping each other and are competitive in a positive way. In this way, a sense of belonging is indeed possible (cf. section 2.6.1.). People should not look down on each other, but rather help each other when they do not know how to play the game. However, participants remain adamant that it is better to play online with friends you know in person than with random strangers. When you play with your close friends, you can build your relationships, rather than thinning yourself out to play with every new person you add to your friends list in a game. Peter conveys that he is satisfied with playing with only his close friends. If he has not met you in person he feels uncomfortable to add you to his social lists. For Peter, spending time with a stranger

in a random game is not enough to create a lasting friendship, because the chances of seeing that person on a regular basis are very slim.

In the end, David explains that it is mostly about the game you are playing. You do not start to play a game because you want to meet new people. You play the game because you are interested in it and want to have enriching experiences within that game. The result of this is that you start to get to know new people and see traits in certain persons that you like, and from thereon you can decide whether you want to become friends with these people or not. For David, it is just an easier method of making friends, because you do not have to face them in person.

I would rather go out and meet people like that. It's much more quicker actually. You don't have all that pressure of being right there in front of the person... That awkwardness of not knowing what to say, looking that other person in the eyes. (David)

When you are playing a game, and you meet someone in the game, you already have a common interest that you share with the person. It is, therefore, very possible to make new friendships through playing games online. However, becoming a part of these online communities is not an easy task for all gamers, and when a person becomes a member of the group, it is not guaranteed that the group will be open and warm towards you.

5.2.2. Becoming a part of online gaming communities

Research suggests that there are many opportunities for players to join groups in various types of games (Badrinarayanan, Sierra, & Martin, 2015; Bardrinarayanan, Sierra, & Taute, 2014). In certain games, you can join a clan which consists of a small group of players who play together intensely, spending most of their playtime with the same people. Billieux, et al. (2013) proposes, that by playing together intensely, players become familiar with each other and try to become a well organised team. In other games, mostly MMORPGs, players can join groups that are much larger (cf. section 2.3.). In these groups, people can focus on playing together as a team, but the group can also be a carefree bunch of players that act independently. Depending on the aim of the group, it can be easy or difficult to gain membership.

When players are serious about online gaming and want to become a successful clan, it can be challenging to join the group. Stephen and Peter express that it is hard to enter a clan in certain games. These communities only want skilful players who will help improve the group. Incorporating this with other studies done on online gaming communities and anonymity, players become even more wary of allowing new players to join their group (Bardrinarayanan, Sierra, & Taute, 2014; Barlett & Gentile, 2016). In certain cases, participants mention that clans require new players to audition in order to determine membership. In David's case, he had to play try-outs for a period and the clan decided afterwards if he could join the group. His performance also determined whether he would be in the first team or the second team. Sometimes groups can be notorious for being good at the specific game and it is, therefore, necessary to create criteria in which players need to fit in order to join.

Depending on the guild, if they are still a starting up guild and they just want members, then you can come in easily. But if it's like a renowned guild, they don't just accept someone just running up to them and saying: 'Can I join your guild?'. So, you have to kind of earn [their] trust in a way or you have to have certain abilities or interests for them. Because a lot of guilds are like... big Bleach (anime show) fans (laughs) or something like that and they're together because they have this sub-community within the gaming community. Uhm, and then they can't just... they won't just accept anyone. Because they want people to... fill in that criteria.
(Emily)

In Emily's narrative, we see that online communities can form teams due to a competitive motive (cf. section 4.2.2.), and then members would become sterner about who can join. The group wishes to win upon entering competitions or succeed when embarking on difficult gaming adventures; as a result, a lot of pressure is put on the members. Participants of this study voice the opinion that, when the clan becomes too serious and competitive, they no longer want to be a part of the group. On the other hand, when a person seeks gaming communities for social and entertaining reasons, it becomes easier to join new groups. However, the simplest way for players to become a part of a group is to play the game. Because of how popular gaming has become, there are hundreds and thousands of groups that are formed and that want new players to join (cf. section 2.2. & 2.3.).

In World of Warcraft, it's like millions of guilds. You just put out there your invitations and someone picks it up. And then you get invited. (Peter)

Peter's statement proposes that, due to the number of players out there, the chances of someone wanting you to join their group are good. Aaron explains that you can take it further by joining social media groups, i.e. the Facebook page of the game, and through this method you can become a part of new groups (cf. section 2.5.3.). Conversely, people are not necessarily keen on approaching strangers online and asking them to become a part of their group. For most participants, the easiest way to join a group is to create one with your own friends. When players feel that they are not really a part of the larger online communities, they often would rather remain in smaller groups with their friends who they know in person.

In some situations, players would create their own group with their personal friends, however, these groups are still in the online world and can be seen by other random players. Players can then decide if they want to allow other players to become a part of their group or not. A few participants mention that they always strive to make people in the game feel welcome. David and Eric enjoy becoming involved with the community by helping other people who seem to struggle. In Ben's case, the game he is playing (Elder Scrolls Online) requires a lot of players to be in the group in order to partake in certain events throughout the game. He, therefore, allows anybody to join his group and does not expect them to fit certain criteria. On the other hand, Peter does not feel the need to add strangers to his group. His group of friends have been playing together for years and have formed a *"tight knit"* bond. It is not easy to allow new people in the group because of the history that he has with his friends.

Depending on the group, becoming a part of online communities can be either an easy or a difficult task. If a group accepts you, it can result in a good feeling and it can lead to new experiences that enhance the game. If a group rejects you, it can make a person feel like an outcast and not feel a sense of belonging towards the gaming community. After exploring how participants can become a part of groups in games, the interview moved more towards whether participants feel included or excluded from the general world of online gaming communities. Stephen shares that it can be especially difficult for new players to become a part of a community and that they would feel more excluded because of the uncertainty of everything new in the game.

For him, it would be hell if he did not have people who included him. You need people in the community who help you to get involved, otherwise it would be a frustrating experience.

... It is actually part of the community's responsibility to create an environment where new players feel welcome and where they can join other groups within the community. (Stephen)

Stephen explains further that, if people support each other, they would play the game longer, and when people feel excluded that it can become a lonely gaming experience. He, on the other hand, feels included in online communities. David also feels included in the communities. He feels that, because people are playing the same game, there is already a sense of connection between the players. People share common interest and feel that they are a part of a group (cf. section 2.6.1.).

... Even when I'm playing with random people, they see you as a part of the community obviously, because you're playing the game. So, that's already a bond made between strangers. (David)

Players can make each other feel included, but for most of the other research participants it does not really feel as if the members of the community try to make them feel like they are part of it. The reasons for why the players feel excluded are different. For Zoey, gaming groups make it feel like that because of her gender, she is not really welcome in this world mostly meant for males.

I think they're just not used to girls being there. And they don't want a girl beating them at something they're supposed to be good at. There's a stereotype that guys are supposed to be good at guns and girls are supposed to be good at cooking. So, if a girl starts shooting at guys and beating them; and it will be a really bad image for guys. So, I think it's that insecurities. (Zoey)

In Zoey's case, it feels like the South African culture of “boys being good at shooting, and girls being good at cooking” makes guys want to act tough and in turn feel humiliated when a girl beats them. Whereas with Emily, it is more of a sense that she does not feel confident enough in her expertise of video games to try and become a part of clans who play games seriously.

I think I'm not skilled enough yet. And that with skill comes confidence. When I'm more skilled I'll be more confident in playing different characters, or doing different things, trying strategies. But I'm not, I know I'm not as skilled yet. So, I'm not as confident. (Emily)

She also feels like she has not yet put in enough effort to really try and become a part of gaming groups. When she played *World of Warcraft*, she preferred to do things on her own and have her own experiences, and in turn she avoided joining the guilds in the game.

I didn't try hard enough. I think that's the big thing. Because while I was playing World of Warcraft, a lot of the time I was just doing my own thing. Just also preferred playing on my own, and I didn't always want to play with other people. (Emily)

Eric's feelings of exclusion come from the notion that, when he plays online, it's only friends that play together and talk to each other. When an outsider tries to join the conversation, they would just ignore that person and keep to themselves.

I feel a bit excluded when I usually talk online or see other people having a conversation online and I can read it. And when I try to take a part of the conversation, there's actually very little times where they actually start talking back to me. I think it's only the people who really know each other that communicate online on a regular basis. And when you try to talk with them, they don't really think or bother about talking to you. Because they're already engaged in their own conversation, and you can't really always take part, or even try to take part in, their conversation. (Eric)

Through these narratives, we can see that there are different types of game members within online gaming communities. For some players, it feels like they are instantly a part of a larger picture and feel welcomed by just playing the same game. For others, it feels like people do not care who you are and do not care if you feel included or excluded. In some cases, it can have an impact on the player and determine whether they will continue to play the game or not; although feeling included or excluded is not entirely necessary in order to enjoy your gaming experience. Aaron notes that, when

he was younger, it mattered to him if people included him in the online group or not. Today, he has matured into a person that still enjoys playing with his friends and feeling included by other people online, but when he feels that people do not wish to make him feel a part of the group, it does not matter to him anymore.

... Maybe a few years back I would want to be [included], but I actually don't care now. It doesn't bother me if they include me or not. I'm on my own. I'm doing my own thing. I have my own life, my own friends. So, it doesn't really matter if they accept me or not. (Aaron)

Having a sense of belonging towards gaming communities is a large part of the daily lives of players. Whether an individual feels like they are able to establish a connection with the other players online is something that allows them to create new friendships and even start or foster a romantic relationship. Throughout their narratives, participants illustrate how, through games, they have met a person and become good friends, and in some cases met a girlfriend/boyfriend. In other cases, gaming helps friendships to grow and keep in contact over vast distances. It helps people to do something with their loved ones to develop an intimate relationship. In the next section, the aim is to explore how games create a platform for people to move beyond being online gaming strangers.

5.2.3. Experiencing a personal relatedness

This sub-theme explores the idea of games creating an environment within which it is possible to become personally involved with someone. It also explores the notion of gamers becoming close friends or even becoming romantically involved. Spending time playing games with friends helps friendships to grow. In most cases, participants describe gaming as an activity that is similar to any other hobby you perform with friends. Throughout the interviews, gaming is often associated with sport, where people spend time together doing something which requires communication and teamwork. Both activities create an environment for people to become friends, but playing online games does have certain benefits over sport. Gamers are able to play from the comfort of their homes (Fuster, et al. 2014), and playing online is more convenient than having to make an effort to meet in person. Salen and Zimmerman (2004) motivate the standpoint that playing games can stretch for longer periods of

time without having the physical strain of playing sports. This results in more time being available for playing games, developing friendships, and meeting new people. Players have stated, however, that they feel that friendships develop at the same pace by playing games as they do with playing sports or doing something else that you have in common with a person.

Stephen expresses how it is possible to not only make friends through gaming, but that it has helped him to meet new people from all over the country. By playing online, Stephen befriends players he enjoys playing with, and over time, he becomes friends with them. He indicates that he would add them on Facebook and keep communicating with them. When it would be time to go to the rAge Expo at the end of the year (About rAge, 2017), he would arrange to meet them in person. Stephen explains that these bonds made over the internet can be similar to real-life friendships. If you have more in common with certain people, you will bond more with them and play more with them. In the case of being with others, if you just share the game you are playing, the friendship will not grow.

Eric feels that online gaming is something that contributes to friendships and relationships. It is something that you can share with others and, in this way, you can make it into something social. Gaming assists him and his brother to spend time together and talk about games when they are hanging out. For him, gaming is comparable to sport in the sense that you can socialise and bond through doing both, but that they are just different perspectives of doing the same thing. With online gaming, socialising with friends is more accessible than it used to be with LANs (Local Area Networking) and you can spend more time with friends this way. This is also seen in the increase of players moving to online gaming (Bardrinarayanan, Sierra, & Taute, 2014). In Emily's words, gaming is something that helps friendships to grow.

... It's definitely something that is possible of online gaming because you meet people that you would probably never have met in real-life. Because you meet people from all over the world. So, yes, definitely that, and it grows much more... Because you're playing the game together, and then you just build on top of that. It's not like you're meeting someone in a bar and you don't know if you have anything in common at all. You kind of know already: 'Okay this person is into games'. So,

this person plays and might play other games and might also be interested in anime. And... like you already, you know that person is already kind of part of this sub-community. (Emily)

In this narrative, gaming provides a place for people to meet other people who have similar interests. Depending on a person's motive, they would decide to befriend other players or rather just remain friends with people they already know. In Eric's situation, he does not feel keen on taking online relationships further and becoming personal friends. He agrees that it is something which is possible, but that he feels too uncomfortable to do it. Aaron experiences similar feelings when expressing that he would rather meet someone in person first and then play games with that person online, than playing with someone online games first and then meet in person. For him, it is very rare to meet someone online that you instantly feel a connection with. Personalities should fit together and you should make a commitment to help the friendship grow. Aaron relates that it only happened once in his life that he instantly felt a connection with someone online. He met someone online and became friends with him over time. Aaron speaks of befriendng a person somewhere in North Africa and playing with him for a long while. However, over time the friendship grew stale and he no longer has contact with this person.

It would seem that it is possible, and maybe even easy, to make friends online. However, effort needs to be put into maintaining this new friendship. You need to keep playing with that person and do more than just playing games. Most participants confirm that gaming cannot be the only aspect of the friendship, and that it would not last if there are no other common interests between friends. It is with this notion that Peter declares that he does not find it worth his effort to befriend random players online. He explains that, if you only have that one game in common, it is not enough to make a connection with someone. He continues by saying the chances of meeting in person is very slim. Thus, Peter persists on developing his friendships with people he knows in person. For him, gaming is something that helps these relationships to grow.

I can basically think of like it's like at a book club. And then they talk about the book. What we do is we've all finished the game and then we talk about the game. I love doing that... like every second weekend we

get together and “braai” (have a barbeque) ... and talk about game endings and how fun it was. (Peter)

Playing online games with others is a way you can share your passion with other people (cf. section 2.4.1. & 2.4.2. on motivation and passion for online gaming). David adds on previous notions of other participants by explaining that gaming does help friendships to grow, because you are still doing an activity with friends. David elaborates on the idea that playing online helps long distance friendships to keep in contact and to grow. Through online gaming, he has become a good friend with someone who lives in Johannesburg. The two have become such good friends, that David feels he can share personal matters with this person.

I would be much more inclined telling one of my friends online: ‘Listen this and this happened’. I don’t really want to talk about it with my family. Because I feel much more inclined with this person ‘cause... I know this person, although I don’t really meet him that often. But you know... you just feel much closer, because you two talk a lot... Obviously you’re gonna start sharing when you’re talking a lot. You can’t really go out. So... you stay there, you just talk. So, you feel much more inclined to share your secrets or... whatever, with this person. (David)

Throughout their narratives, participants share how gaming makes it possible to become close friends with someone you meet online. The interaction between players might be brief, but it is possible to feel a connection with the person one meets online (cf. section 2.4.2.). However, people are cautious to open up with each other and it can take a long time to become friends. By helping each other and building a friendship in the game, it is possible to become close friends.

I can’t remember really how we met. I think he just came up to me while I was playing World of Warcraft and asked if I can help him level up. I’ve never met him in person... We’ve become really close. I have his phone number. There was a time when we talked much more... We don’t play online together anymore really. But... at a point he was one of my best friends. I would come home from school or whatever and go online and I would play World of Warcraft with him. And that was very fun. I can’t really remember how we met. But we just gradually... it was a long

process. Because I was a... I think it was in Matric when I met him. So, I was quite older. I've been through my courses of World of Warcraft... So, it was slow, but... we became very close friends, to be honest.
(Emily)

Emily states that she made a close friend through online gaming, but, over time, they have grown apart. Eric adds to this by expressing that online friendships do not necessarily last, because of the brief interactions you have with each other. You might feel a connection with someone and start to play with them, but arranging to play together requires effort. In the end, Eric feels that it takes too much time to build a friendship online. It is faster to play online alone or with real-life friends rather than having to wait for a stranger to join your game. It is easier for gamers to rely on their real-life friends than to trust a stranger to help them win in online games.

... [I] never really kept contact with anyone. There are a few friends who invited me. We played maybe one or two times together and I still have them on my friends list. But I never really... hassled myself to try and invite them again to play a game. It's not actually worth my time. I'd only go out on my own and play. Rather waiting for someone I previously invited to come online and play with me. Sometimes I'd see they're online and I'd just go and play on my own without inviting them to play with me. (Eric)

Literature on online gaming stipulates that it is possible for strangers to become friends online (Hickerson & Mowen, 2013; Lundmark, 2015). However, it takes time and effort to build a relationship. After establishing a friendship, it is important to keep playing together. But just playing together is not enough. Most participants feel that they need to take these friendships further and meet in person. Even after becoming close friends and knowing each other, players still feel that just playing games together is not enough. There must be shared interests and activities other than gaming to further develop a friendship.

Interviewer: Can gaming be something that brings people together more than other activities?

Emily: I think so, but I definitely think then... it can't just stay a friendship online. It has to become a friendship in person. It can start and continue as a friendship online. But then the face to face just has to be added for me, I think. Because it has a different quality when you're with someone in person.

Throughout the interviews, players convey their opinions on the possibility of making friends online. For most, it is possible, but, over time, these friendships seem to fade away. Just having online gaming in common with each other is not enough for most gamers. They need to develop these friendships. Additionally, participants share similar experiences relating to romantic relationships. Through online gaming, Peter met and became romantically involved with a female gamer. However, the long distance made it difficult to maintain the relationship and it faded away. Not being able to see each other has a similar detrimental factor that caused the relationship to die. David is another gamer who met a girlfriend through online gaming. For him, meeting her online was easier and more comfortable than it would have been to meet her in person. After creating a friendship online, they started to communicate over other forms of social media and then started to interact in person.

Online gaming can be beneficial for romantic relationships. However, it seems that meeting the significant other in person first and then using online games as a means to connect with each other proves a better option. Zoey and her boyfriend met in person and started to play games together online. He moved away due to career opportunities, but gaming remained a way for them to connect and to build their relationship.

... It (online gaming) helps it to grow and to stay in contact. Because before we both bought Overwatch, uhm... I don't know. We're both introvert people. So, we don't like phone conversations and it's expensive and we don't like messaging really. Because it's so... I don't know. You have to at least hear the person, the tone of voice. Because there's a lot of misunderstandings over text. So, it helps us a lot, we talk a lot more. We talk almost every day where we used to talk only on weekends. So, we stay in contact a lot more, and it helps us to grow. Because as we're sitting there and talking we learn stuff about each

other we wouldn't have seen otherwise. And it feels like something you achieved when you win a match together. It feels nice. So yeah, I think it helps us grow. (Zoey)

Playing online together helped Zoey and her boyfriend to maintain contact and to grow in their relationship. Emily and her boyfriend also met before they started playing online together. She builds on Zoey's account by stating that playing together helps their relationship to grow because you are sharing something you love with the person you love.

... That really helped our relationship grow. Because when we started playing Hearthstone for example, he would come over and we would just play Hearthstone on my iPad together the whole night. And would just... It would be fun, you know. There's a lot more topics of conversation and it keeps the conversation new. I mean we've been dating for almost six years now. It's not just a new relationship anymore. And it just, it's just fun to do stuff like that together with the person you love, you know. It's... because it's a safe space and a safe place and a fun place. And it's just added with the person you love the most in the world. And that's just... that's the best combination ever (laughs). I think so. (Emily)

Throughout the players' narratives, different perspectives on how gaming influences friendships are given. For most gamers, it is possible to befriend a person online and become good friends. However, maintaining an online friendship through playing games is not sufficient. People must have more than one interest in common and bonding in person seems to be a necessity. Exploring further the lived experiences of online gamers led to the possibility of gamers experiencing a shared emotional connection with each other. Players spend many hours playing together and it helps relationships to grow. Yet it is uncertain whether online games provide a platform for players to share intimate details with each other.

Most respondents state that sharing personal information and intimate details of their lives are kept at a minimum. Stephen expresses that he does feel an emotional connectedness with his friends by sharing their passions for gaming and for overcoming obstacles in games. However, he does not easily share something online with someone he does not know and he keeps his gaming accounts private. Only after

adding them as friends and spending more time with them, does Stephen begin to share personal details. But the shared information remains mostly about where they live and what they do for a living. Once he has met them in person, the friendship starts to grow. Aaron builds on this viewpoint by explaining that he feels gaming is not a platform where a person can share personal details or deep emotions. He elaborates that you can talk with a personal friend about what is going on in your life, but that you can do that anywhere if it is a close friend. Aaron states that he cannot see online gaming as a platform where a person meets another, they become close friends and share such personal information. If it is to happen, it will take a long time.

Other participants confirm that they would only share intimate details about their daily lives with close personal friends. Zoey feels comfortable in sharing personal emotions with her boyfriend while playing online games, but they have been developing their relationship over years. She feels that sharing personal aspects of her life online will not be taken seriously by others and that they will start to offend her. Emily adds to this by stating she will not share something intimate online with someone either.

I think, yeah, because of the stranger danger. You want to be careful. Even though you think you know this person very well. I just... I think there's just this cautiousness built into us all. I don't know. (Emily)

It seems that the aspect of not having contact in person deters people from sharing personal emotions with fellow players, especially if those players are strangers. Playing online games can allow you to maintain friendships and even to create new ones, but people will still prefer sharing intimate information in person. On the other hand, Zoey explains that she feels more comfortable sharing personal details of her life with her boyfriend behind the safety of the screen. The idea of not being in the spotlight and doing something else makes her feel more at ease sharing something negative that happened that day. It offers a distraction and allows her to put her thoughts together in order to share her emotions when it suits her.

Conclusion

This dissertation focuses on viewing an aspect of reality, namely the lived experiences of online gamers who are enrolled as students at the University of the Free State, by using a phenomenological approach. The phenomenological paradigm in general seeks to gain a deeper understanding of the everyday life-worlds of research participants through their subjective interpretations. Therefore, the aim of this dissertation is to gain an understanding of what online gaming means to an individual and how it becomes a substantial part of their daily life. The interpretative and phenomenological foundation proved valuable in conducting an engaging study on the everyday lives of online gamers. It succeeds in its aim to understand how individuals perceive their realities by exploring specific lived experiences related to gaming.

In the literature review, an investigation is undertaken to gain an informative perception of what video games are and what online gaming entails. The literature review provides a context of the current insights into the phenomenon of online gaming. Video games offer an immersive experience unlike other forms of media. Players are provided opportunities to grow and allow video games to become a part of their identity. However, it has often been seen as a recreational or passive leisure activity by most people. Views are starting to shift towards the perception that video games are more of a distinctive activity which requires a substantial amount of agency (Lorentz, et al. 2015). In this dissertation, the goal is to explore the life-worlds of online gamers to gain a deeper understanding of why gaming is such a large part of their lives. The aim is also to investigate how online gamers experience a sense of belonging to online communities, whether they experience an integration into online communities, or feel isolated. By using in-depth interviews, the narratives of the participants are explored in order to shed light on their lived experiences. From the narratives of the online gamers, six themes stood out. These themes illuminate what it means to be an online gamer and why it is an important part of their life-world and identity.

The first theme explores how participants become involved with video games and how it develops into an involvement. In-depth interviews are used to explore the different areas of participants' life-worlds and how they became a part of online gaming.

Becoming involved with video games often starts at a young age. In most cases, participants express that it was someone, with whom they have a close relationship, who introduced them to gaming. It can be an older sibling or cousin who then introduces their younger family member to the gaming world. In other cases, it is friends or neighbours who introduce players to new gaming experiences. It is also possible for individuals to explore video gaming on their own. Thus, there are many ways for a person to become involved with gaming, and each situation is unique. However, when a player starts to engage with video gaming, they inevitably progress towards online gaming. Participants indicate that the gaming community progressed to using internet connections and that it was necessary to obtain internet access in order to remain a part of the community. With online gaming, more opportunities come forth and players find that there are certain driving forces that motivate them to continue playing online games.

The driving forces behind online gaming is the second theme to emerge in this dissertation. Various driving forces exist that motivate people to play video games. Throughout the narratives, two driving forces stood out. Firstly, playing online provides the opportunity to socialise with friends and strangers. Secondly, when playing online games, a feeling of competitiveness is unavoidable and drives a person to continue playing. Playing with friends is an important feature of online games. Gaming provides an opportunity to these individuals to keep contact with their friends and, in the end, it provided for them in terms of their interpersonal socialisation motive. It is a convenient way of socialising with friends and it can be done from the comfort of one's own home. Although socialising with friends and meeting new people can be appealing prospects that motivate people to play games, another motivation stands out, which seems to be more influential on players to take part in online games, namely, competitiveness. This driving force is prevalent in online gaming, and all participants acknowledge its existence; in themselves and in other players. Participants stated that competitiveness can enrich the gaming experience and be a positive attribute. However, competitiveness can also be a negative aspect of online gaming that drives people away from the activity.

Passion forms a part of the driving forces of online gaming and contributes to players engaging actively in online games. Having a passion for something can be an important motivator for a person to partake in something. A player can have a

harmonious or obsessive passion towards gaming, and both passions can be seen in the narratives of the players. Participants state that their passion for gaming can direct their life choices and career paths. On the other hand, passion can also be minute and allow gaming to stay a small part of the individuals' life-world. Lastly, minor aspects of gaming can also motivate players to continue to engage in gaming and demotivate them to play as well. For some participants, challenging games can offer an enriching experience and they want to play more. However, repetitiveness can be a discouraging factor for most participants to continue playing.

The Social Construction of Reality is the third main theme. It explores how video games are able to pull players into another world and the way it takes the focus away from the real world. Immersion and escaping reality are two dimensions of *The Social Construction of Reality* within video games. In the participants' narratives, they express immersion as something that affects players' emotions and thoughts. People live themselves into these gaming characters, but, for them, it is specifically this issue that enhances their gaming experiences. For these players, the realities of their characters coincide with their own.

Through immersion, video games allow players to place themselves in the shoes of the character with which they are playing. Participants of the study share stories on how immersion enhances their experiences. It affects their real-life thoughts and emotions. In some cases players admit to experiencing the video game environment as being similar to their real life. When a player starts to prefer the game's reality over his/her own reality, it can become a form of escaping reality in order to relieve the stress and demands of the real world. Two participants elaborate on the fact that they use video games as a means to escape reality.

Immersing with gender swapping and morals also forms a part of the *The Social Construction of Reality* within video games. Some games present a choice of gender for the player. According to Song and Jung (2015), being able to play the role of a different gender opens opportunities that allow players to encounter unique experiences. Some of the male participants reveal that playing as a female character provides a new and unique experience. It is different from what they are used to when games only contain male protagonists. For females, playing as a male character can have an entirely different outcome, and is often used to hide their female identity from

other people in the online game world. Morals also play a role in video game immersion. Some players are able to put aside their morals in order to endeavour new journeys and discover different experiences. Empathy and immersion seem to play a vital role in how morals influence the players' behaviour in games. Being able to place themselves in others' shoes by using intuition allows players to feel bad when conducting harmful actions towards others (even if they are virtual beings) (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2012). When a player cares about the characters in the game, and it feels like a realistic environment, the player will tend to act more in accordance to their morals.

The fourth theme of this dissertation focuses on the everyday life of gamers and their identity. For most of the research participants, gaming has become a part of their routine and it is something they do daily, making it a part of their habitus. Others seek to continue building on their gaming lives and include it into more of their life-aspects. However, for some, it is more important to focus on other things in life. Keeping a balance between gaming and other facets of life is something that participants are aware of. Being enrolled at the University of the Free State, participants agree that it is important to focus on their studies and that, although gaming is an important part of their lives, developing a career and making a success of their academic life is more important. Participants also share how gaming made significant impacts on their lives, and in some cases, changed them to become better people.

Partaking in online gaming can play a role in how you portray yourself to others and how you view the people you come across. The social identity of a person steps in and determines whether they see themselves as a part of the gaming community or as a separate person. Participants exemplify that they do see themselves as gamers, but that it is not the core identity that stands out when they think about themselves. If you allow it to be, gaming can become a large part of your life and filter into your identity. For some players, games can have an influence on their personalities as well. However, players feel that it is more likely that their personalities influence their behaviour in games and the life choices they make which relate to gaming. Most participants would agree that their personality in real-life seeps over into their actions in games. If you are an introverted person in real-life, you would be introverted in games too. This links to observations made in the literature (Park & Lee, 2012).

There are several insights on the perceptions and stereotypes surrounding online games. The fifth theme focuses on the perceptions participants have towards other gamers and the gaming community. It explores the perceptions of the participants towards existing gaming stereotypes. Firstly, research participants state that they see online gamers as persons similar to themselves, but these viewpoints differ depending on the environments within which they interact with each other. Upon meeting other gamers in person, participants usually express a positive experience. If a gamer meets a fellow gamer in person, the interaction is often a more enriching event. Having a unique quality in common creates an interest between them – which usually stirs up a conversation about games. However, participants confirm that, when they interact with other online gamers in the online environment, it usually leads to negative experiences.

Stereotyping leads people to make generalisations and assumptions about a specific group, and these stereotypes can be positive or negative. People tend to misjudge things they do not understand. Individuals who do not partake in online gaming, often misunderstand the enriching experience it can provide. Participants express that existing stereotypes are mostly an inaccurate portrayal of gamers. However, participants do not feel that these stereotypes have a detrimental effect on their daily lives.

The last theme explores the various aspects that a sense of belonging in online gaming communities can provide. Feeling that you are a part of the online gaming community is something that is subjectively experienced between the participants of this study. For some players, it is possible to instantly feel a sense of belonging upon entering a random community, and they find it easy to become friends with strangers. Other participants explain that they feel a sense of connection with the online community, but that this connection is something they only share with their real-life friends – who also happen to be online gamers. If they play alone in an online game, they do not really feel like a part of the community without these friends at their sides. Lastly, it is also possible for players to feel no sense of connection with the community at all. It is only possible for these participants to feel that they are a part of a group, if the members of the group are their friends.

Becoming a part of online gaming communities is a contributing factor to feeling a sense of belonging in online gaming communities. Studies inform that there are many opportunities for players to join groups in various types of games (Badrinarayanan, Sierra, & Martin, 2015; Bardrinarayanan, Sierra, & Taute, 2014). In certain games, you can join a clan which consists of a small group of players who play together intensely, spending most of their playtime with the same people. In that way, you become familiar with each other and try to become a well organised team (Billieux, et al. 2013). In other games, mostly MMORPGs, players can join groups that are much bigger. In these groups, people can focus on playing together as a team, but the group can also be a carefree bunch of players that act independently. Depending on the aim of the group, it can be easy to gain membership, but in some cases, it proves to be difficult.

Through online gaming, friendships and bonds are forged. In certain cases, players' relationships can grow in such a way that they can experience a personal relatedness with each other. Gaming helps individuals to connect with each other and to create lasting friendships. It also provides certain players with a means to maintain a connection with those that they have entered into a romantic relationship with after meeting online. However, most participants express that they do not feel that video gaming is a platform where people are able to share intimate information with each other. Participants indicate that they would much rather tell their intimate life experiences to their close friends, in person. On the other hand, some players feel that the safety of a screen provides a mask with which you can safely express your emotions with others when you feel that you are ready.

The six main themes of this dissertation aim to illuminate the lived experiences of online gamers. It offers an exploration and understanding as to how online gamers perceive and experience online gaming and its associated communities. Together, the analysis chapters construct a narrative of how person can become involved with this phenomenon. A narrative that gives insight into the life stories of online gamers and many aspects of their everyday lives. However, there is still a need for further exploration into the narratives of online gamers in future research. This dissertation serves as a foundation of understanding of what online gaming is and what it entails. Further research is required to expand the literature of online gaming and its associated communities. Firstly, a more diverse sample of the general gaming population is required. The participants recruited for this dissertation mainly consisted

of white males. This links with literature, indicating that it is mainly households with higher income that are able to partake in online gaming. However, in South Africa, members of other racial groups do also partake in gaming experiences and can offer different insights into the lived experiences of online gamers. It is necessary to explore how various cultures influence individuals' involvement with online gaming. It might be a different narrative or a similar narrative to what the current participants presented. Secondly, this dissertation focuses on the general lived experiences of online gamers. There is no specific focus on the gender differences that there might be within the online gaming community. Throughout the narratives of the participants, the two female participants expand on their narratives as something different than what the male gamers experience. Therefore, it is important to consider that the lived experiences of female gamers differ substantially from male gamers. Female gamers face more stigma and prejudice because of their gender; from both male gamers and other females who do not play online games. There is a need to study the narrative lives, specifically of female gamers, to better understand how they function in the online gaming world – that is often perceived as a male domain. Lastly, participants express that, because video gaming and online gaming is such an evolving phenomenon, research would differ depending on the type of population. Participants illustrate that younger gamers will have different perspectives on the same themes that follow from the analysis. Older generations of gamers will also have different viewpoints and experiences. The world of online gaming is a relatively new phenomenon. The participants of this study grew up with video games, but they did not grow up with online gaming. Online gaming became a part of gamers' lives at relatively the same time. However, the age of the gamers differs from each other. It is, therefore, necessary to consider that this dissertation is mainly referring to individuals that meet similar criteria as the participants in this study. Future research should incorporate participants of different ages.

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KEY TERMS

Phenomenology

Social constructivism

Online video gaming

MMORPGs (Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games)

Lived experiences

Sense of belonging

Immersion

Socialisation

Passion

Identity

Stereotypes

APPENDIX A: ETHICAL APPROVAL



Faculty of the Humanities

19-Aug-2016

Dear Mr Pietersen

Ethics Clearance: Online gamers, lived experiences and sense of belonging: a study of students at the University of the Free State, Bloemfontein.

Principal Investigator: Mr André Pietersen

Department: Sociology (Bloemfontein Campus)

APPLICATION APPROVED

With reference to your application for ethical clearance with the Faculty of the Humanities. I am pleased to inform you on behalf of the Research Ethics Committee of the faculty that you have been granted ethical clearance for your research.

Your ethical clearance number, to be used in all correspondence is: **UFS-HSD2016/0330**

This ethical clearance number is valid for research conducted for one year from issuance. Should you require more time to complete this research, please apply for an extension.

We request that any changes that may take place during the course of your research project be submitted to the ethics office to ensure we are kept up to date with your progress and any ethical implications that may arise.

Thank you for submitting this proposal for ethical clearance and we wish you every success with your research.

Yours Sincerely

Prof. Robert Peacock
Chair: Research Ethics Committee
Faculty of the Humanities



APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT SHEET

Thank you for showing interest in participating in this research study. This page serves as an information sheet to allow you to be fully aware of the purpose of the study.

Title of the research: *Online gamers, lived experiences and sense of belonging: a study of students at the University of the Free State, Bloemfontein.*

The research takes a qualitative approach and aims at exploring the narratives of individuals that partake in online gaming. This study, therefore, strives to gain a better understanding of online gaming. With this objective in mind, there will be focus on various key elements that consists in online gaming, namely; experiences of playing, motives for playing, how online gaming has become a part of the life of the gamer. The study also aims at investigating how online gamers experience a sense of belonging to online communities. In other words, how a person is integrated into online communities and how one feels as a part of these communities.

Findings from this study will enhance the understanding of this phenomenon in the field of sociology. Therefore, the following research questions are posed to guide the study:

1. How do online gamers perceive and experience online gaming and their associated communities?
2. How do online gamers experience a sense of belonging to online communities?
3. How does this sense of belonging enable the online gamer to experience group associations?
4. How are emotional connections made and maintained within a virtual environment to promote a sense of belonging?

Note that your participation is voluntary and that you as participant may withdraw from the research project at any time. All information given by the participant will be treated with highest confidence by the researcher. The length of the interview is approximately 2 hours. However, follow-up interviews might be required depending on whether enough information has been gathered. No names of any participant will be made public. In the case of reporting the findings, fake names (pseudonyms) will be used while referring to each participant to protect the identity of the person. The transcripts of each interview will be handed back to the participants to allow them to ensure that their story is being told from their viewpoint.

Participating in this research project will be beneficial towards broadening the understanding of online gamers. There are no foreseeable risks towards each participant. However, the researcher will be considerate towards the academic schedule of the participant.

Please be reminded that participation is voluntary and that you may choose to withdraw at any time. No further involvement will be required upon withdrawing from the study.

Yours sincerely
André Pietersen

This study has the support and backing of the University of the Free State's Department of Sociology and formal ethical clearance from the Faculty of Humanities Ethics Committee (Clearance number: **UFS-HSD2016/0330** dated: 19-Aug-2016)

For any further inquiries regarding the research, please feel free to contact:

- The researcher, André Pietersen: [REDACTED] or
- The research supervisor, Prof. Jan K. Coetzee: [REDACTED] or
- The counsellor, Marilet Kotzé: [REDACTED]

Consent Form

Please fill in the required information. Please **keep** both the consent form and the informed consent sheet as evidence of participation.

Study: **Online gamers, lived experiences and sense of belonging: a study of students at the University of the Free State, Bloemfontein.**

Researcher: **André Jacobus Pietersen**

Name: _____

Surname: _____

Contact number: _____ Email: _____

By signing this form you agree to the following term:

- I hereby give free and informed consent to participate in the abovementioned research study.
- The researcher has explained the study to me and I fully understand the purpose of the study
- I hereby give permission to the researcher to use the information that he gathered during the interviews to conduct his research that may be published in journals, and conference presentations.

Signature of participation: _____ **Date:** _____

Signature of the researcher: _____

Consent Form

Please fill in the required information. Please **return** this form to the researcher.

Study: **Online gamers, lived experiences and sense of belonging: a study of students at the University of the Free State, Bloemfontein.**

Researcher: **André Jacobus Pietersen**

Name: _____

Surname: _____

Contact number: _____ Email: _____

By signing this form you agree to the following term:

- I hereby give free and informed consent to participate in the abovementioned research study.
- The researcher has explained the study to me and I fully understand the purpose of the study
- I hereby give permission to the researcher to use the information that he gathered during the interviews to conduct his research that may be published in journals, and conference presentations.

Signature of participation: _____ **Date:** _____

Signature of the researcher: _____

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Thank you for participating in the study: *Online gamers, lived experience, and sense of belonging: a study at the University of the Free State*. The purpose of the study is to explore the narratives of online gamers and their experiences of online gaming in their everyday life. The study also aims at exploring how connectedness with the online communities are established.

Please be reminded that participation is entirely voluntary and that you may withdraw at any moment. You are allowed to skip any questions you do not wish to answer or to take a break if you feel the need to. If any question is unclear please feel free to ask for a better explanation of the question. The interview will be recorded for transcriptive purposes. The interviews will be transcribed verbatim and emailed back to you for the aim towards faithfulness of your perceptions towards online gaming. The transcripts will then be used for data analysis to identify possible themes and answer the research questions stated in the informed consent form. Lastly, be reminded that your name will not be revealed and that a fake name (pseudonym) will be used when referring to your interview in the research report.

The recorder will now be turned on and the interview will commence

Name?

1. Field of study?

2. What is your favourite game to play at the moment?

- Describe this game to me?
- Why it is your favourite game at the moment?

3. How did you become involve with video gaming in general?

- Was there anyone in particular who introduced you to the world of video games?
- How long have you been involved with video gaming?

4. How did you become involve with *online* gaming?

- Are there any major differences for you between offline and online video gaming?
- Which do you prefer?
- Elaborate/Explain?

5. Explain in your own words what MMORP-Games (Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games, i.e. World of Warcraft, The Devision, etc.) are?

6. Are you currently playing any MMORPGs?

- If yes, which one and why? How does this online experience make you feel?
- If no, why have you put this part of your online gaming experience on hold?

7. Tell me about your feelings while playing MMORPGs?

- What are the motives for playing MMORPGs?
- Elaborate/explain?

7.1. Do your motives for playing online games differ from your motives for playing offline games?

- How do they differ?

7.2. Do you experience a sense of competitiveness in online gaming?

- If yes, explain this experience?
- If no, why not?

8. Do you experience a sense of immersion (in a virtual reality) while playing MMORPGs?

- Elaborate/explain?
- How does this emerged state make you feel (safe, in control)?
- Elaborate/explain?

9. Would you state that you are passionate about online gaming?

- Describe why you are passionate about gaming?
- If not, why are you not so passionate about gaming?

10. Do you feel a connection with the virtual communities and/or other players within MMORPGs or online games?

- How would you describe this connection (or lack of connection)?
- How do you become a part of the groups in the online world? (what to you do to become a part of the online community?)
- Do they need to accept you?
- Yes, what did you have to do or achieve to be considered a member?
- If no, how did this make you feel?

11. Do you feel included (or excluded) into the online communities of MMORPGs?

- Elaborate/explain this experience?

12. You talked about your motives for playing online games. Would you say these motives or needs to play online games are being met by the people in the online communities?

- How do the groups and online communities fulfil your need to play?

13. Have you ever experienced a sense of personal relatedness or friendship with someone online?

- Have you ever met this individual (due to the global access, friendships and bonds can be made around the world)?
- Describe your feelings about when you met him/her and how your friendship has grown?

14. Has online gaming helped your friendships to grow or develop in any way?

- Have any bonds been created through online gaming?

15. Have you ever experienced shared emotional connections with someone online?

- Can you give me an example?

16. Describe how online gaming has become a part of your life?

- Has online gaming changed your life in anyway?

17. What are your perceptions of other people that play online games?

18. Do you think that there are currently any stereotypes or stigmas against online gamers in general?

- If yes, how do you perceive or feel about these views?
- How would you classify yourself?
- If no, elaborate/explain?

19. Have you ever partook in gender swapping (played as a character with the opposite sex as your own) in MMORPGs?

- What are your perceptions on gender swapping?
- What are your experiences with gender swapping?
- If you answered yes, could you explain or elaborate why you partake in gender swapping?
- If you answered no, could you explain or elaborate why you have not partaken in gender swapping?

20. Do you identify with the characters you play in online gaming?

- If yes, elaborate/explain this experience?
- If no, how do you perceive the characters you play as in online gaming?

21. Do you think that your morals in real life are mostly portrayed through your gameplay in video games?

- If yes, elaborate/explain why this is the case?
- If no, elaborate/explain why not?

22. Is there anything you feel we have not covered about your experiences of online gaming?

23. Is there anything you would like to elaborate on or add?