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Looking for the Goodness: Digital Gamers Constructing Identities across Social Contexts

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Abstract

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This qualitative study examined the social interactions and identity constructions of ethnically diverse adolescent males from urban, working-class backgrounds in the process of learning and applying complex mechanics and strategies while engaged in digital gaming. Ethnographic techniques and portraiture methodologies were used to collect and organize data focused on how the male participants in and across settings constructed their individual and group identities. Data were generated from observations, informal and formal interviews, and document analyses focused on how the gamers used language and acted in different situations. One-on-one tutoring of the researcher by the gamers provided additional data about their values, beliefs, communication preferences, and cultural markers. Principles of Identity Theory and Critical Race Theory guided the data analyses. The data illustrated that the gamers were highly influenced by macro level hegemonic ideologies of masculinity. This influenced their male identity standards across multiple contexts, including formal schooling. Findings indicated that the socio-cultural processes of the digital gaming class supported male identity construction and verification processes, and motivated the participants to take risks in their learning processes

while developing self-esteem. The social system of the gaming class included group norms with symbolic meanings that produced perceptions of male gender performances. In addition, the supervisor of the gaming class functioned as a prototypical role model who facilitated a predictability component of expected behaviors for the gamers. These complex processes were the catalyst for shaping role and group identities that engendered individual goal setting that was connected to learning processes, gaining and maintaining status, and sustaining the social structure of the group. This study adds to existing scholarship by identifying culturally based needs and interests gleaned from a digital gaming community made up of Latino American, African American, Asian American, and Native American males. Implications for more culturally responsive instruction to improve the socio-cultural, personal, interpersonal, and intellectual achievement of male youth of color in both formal and informal learning contexts is discussed.

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League of Legends Glossary

This list is comprised of acronyms and words that are included in the portraits and dialogue used by the gamers in this study. It is not a complete list of acronyms and words used in the game of *League of Legends*. They are based on descriptions provided on the game's website, <http://na.leagueoflegends.com/board/showthread.php?t=2154531>.

AD - Attack Damage

AFK – “away from keyboard;” often used to refer to someone who is not moving.

AoE - Area of Effect describes spells that do damage in an area as opposed to just on one target.

AP - Ability Power

Bottom - the lowest lane in Summoner's Rift Classic version of the game.

Bots – Champions controlled by the computer game program

Buff – Something that makes a champion stronger in some way

Build – The set of items you buy for your champion.

Creeps - minions

Farm – To kill minions and get gold; someone who is well farmed has a lot of points.

Feed – To give someone a lot of kills; if someone is a feeder, he/she is dying a lot.

Gank – usually to sneak up to someone with the intention of killing him or her. The player being ganked usually does not expect this; otherwise it would just be a ‘fight’.

Harass – To deal significant damage to someone frequently. This is different from a fight and is usually used in the phase where the enemy slowly gets lower and lower in health so that eventually he will need to return to base or will be weak enough to jump on him and kill him.

Hotkeys - keys or key combinations for use within a match which, when typed, provide quick access to certain aspects of the game. A few hot keys most commonly used are **q, w, e, and r** that control a champion's four abilities, respectively.

IP – Influence points that one gets from playing games that can be used to buy champions, runes, and rune pages.

Juke – To trick someone into going the wrong way when he/she is chasing you. This is often done by being invisible for a few seconds using the brush, the fog of war, etc.

Jungle – Refers to almost every place on the game map that is not in a lane or at a base. It is where the jungle monsters reside.

Jungler - The player who mostly stays in the jungle and gains gold from killing the monsters there.

KS – Killsteal; to steal a kill from someone by getting the last hit on the champion.

Lane – One of the (three in Summoner's Rift and two in Twisted Treeline) 'roads' on the map.

Mana - the resource of a champion necessary to cast most of his/her 4 abilities. The mana pool is represented with a blue bar below the green health bar and 2 numbers (# / #) in the middle of it.

Mana regenerates over time and this rate can be increased with masteries and items bought in the game shop.

Map – the battlefield of the game. There are three different maps players can choose to play.

The classic version of the game is played on the map called “Summoner’s Rift.”

Mia = Missing in action

Mid – the middle lane in Summoner’s Rift (the classic version).

Noob/Newb/Newbie/Nub/Nab – Originally used to refer to a beginner player. These terms are now used more often to refer to someone who is a bad player.

Nuke – Dealing a large amount of damage in a short time; also called burst.

Push – To advance in a lane towards the enemy nexus with the intention of destroying towers, inhibitors, or the nexus.

RP – Riot points that a player gets by paying real money or winning competitions with which one can buy champions, skins, name changes, and other things.

Runes - enhancements provided to a champion before a match begins to augment the champion's abilities. Runes can be purchased with Influence Points (IPs) from the Riot Store. Each rune grants a small bonus in a specific category, which stack up on each other to grant larger bonuses.

Shop – The in-game shop in a base where one can buy items for his or her champion with gold.

Not to be confused with store.

Skins - the color schemes or appearances of a champion. Most skins can be bought from the Riot Store with Riot Points that can be won or purchased using real money.

Spells – a champion’s bound abilities. Champions are allowed to use two Summoner spells during any game. They are selected during the Champion Selection before each match and cannot be changed for the duration of the match.

Special – Champion’s ultimate weapon or ability controlled by the letter “r” on the keyboard.

Squishy – A champion who is very easy to kill because of low max hp/armor or magic resistance; the opposite of durable.

Steal - Specific definitions of this vary but always at least refers to getting the last hit on a unit when an ally is already attacking it. It can refer to stealing a champion kill, a minion kill, or a jungle monster. It usually has a negative meaning as in “you 'stole' from your ally.”

Store – The ‘out-of-game’ *League of Legends* store in which one can buy champions, runes, and other things with RP or IP; not to be confused with “shop.”

Stun – A rebuff that completely shuts down a gamer’s character. They are unable to move, attack, or do abilities for the duration of the stun.

Tank – are champions that are usually very durable and are supposed to initiate fights and take up most of the damage. Tanks often also have abilities that are useful to disable the enemy team.

Top – The uppermost lane in Summoner’s Rift and Twisted Treeline or the top capture point in Dominion.

Tower dive - to attack someone under their turret. This means that the attacker will get attacked by the tower while fighting, so he or she will receive a lot of damage.

Troll - someone who does not take something seriously and deliberately tries to ruin something for those who are taking it seriously (though this could occasionally be used in a more humorous non-malicious manner).

Ult – Ultimate refers to a champion’s 4th ability, which he/she can usually only pick at level 6.

Wards - items that can be purchased in the shop that reveal invisible dangers once placed on the map.

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DEDICATION

To my grandmothers,

Quanita Prentice Hill

Zenobia Jamerson Pamplin

Dorothy Bell Mays

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION: CONNECTIONS AMONG DIGITAL GAMING, IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION, AND LEARNING

1.1 Background

Identity treatment within many gaming technologies is closely aligned with multicultural theory where learning and identity are conceived as dynamic and continually reshaped through experience and reflection (Gay, 2010; Lee, 2007). Digital gaming develops relationships between identities within the game, the knowledge players acquire, and how the game is played that can make the content knowledge of the game more meaningful and relevant to the learner (Squire, 2006). These connections are often oversimplified. This study explored the complexity of these connections.

Many ethnically and culturally diverse young people struggle with learning that they view is irrelevant to their existence and identity. Smith (1999) explained some of the struggles for culture and identity as historically colonized people attempt to develop a sense of authentic humanity. In this study these struggles involved contextual factors and participants of a digital gaming community who attempted to develop enhanced identities and humanities. The goal was to determine what power, if any, these processes held in shaping the identities and perceptions of self so that the male participants were motivated to learn complex gaming mechanics and strategies.

Young males of color, particularly African Americans, Latino Americans, and Native Americans, are often identified as the least successful in formal academic settings. This study investigated spaces where a group composed of young males from various minority groups successfully engaged in cooperative learning processes. The learning centered on a digital game

where there were relationships between identities and the knowledge acquired which made the content more meaningful and relevant to the gamers as suggested by Squire (2006).

Examining digital gaming contexts among diverse populations of males offers a window into their worlds with the potential to produce knowledge that assists in shaping formal learning experiences that constructively guide rather than collide with academic identity and performances in school. Still another important factor is the growing recognition of digital games and gaming processes as effective educative tools in and of themselves. These tools need to be considered in terms of the diversity of the students who engage with them.

1.2 Theoretical Underpinnings for this Study

The focus of this investigation rested on a research-based model rationalized by theories within game learning theory and Culturally Responsive Instruction (CRI). These epistemologies highlighted two significant points that drove the conceptualization of this study. One was the potential of digital gaming as a powerful education tool that is capable of servicing a wide spectrum of diversity. The second was the importance of contextual factors in and outside of digital games that can be designed to either augment or impede learning with this phenomenal educational tool.

Squire (2006) recommended that educators think of video games as “research and development labs” for generating theory and practice in education. Such inquiry can potentially deliver insights for providing learning experiences that better serve diverse students. Some aspects of the support systems accessible to digital game players are related to identity constructions such as players experiencing success while increasing knowledge and improving

skills, and the development of hybrid identities where players claim a kind of phenomenological success through the game characters they control.

Many digital games are currently designed with simulations that include micro-control elements that allow players to extend self into a virtual space. This empowers players and enables them to connect the real world with the virtual. It is a kind of hybrid identity that expands their epistemic frames when producing knowledge as the player takes control rather than an instructor. In what Squire (2006) calls a “transformative identity space,” a player assumes a different identity that requires negotiating the game world as an alter ego to survive in that world. It is useful to consider how learners who traditionally struggle academically in formal school environments transform their identities into ones where they see themselves as empowered to take action as they regularly experience both success and failure in digital gaming.

Games encourage and assist players to enact attitudes or stances similar to those of professionals or academics as they engage with their hybrid identities. It is a kind of embodied empathy where the game players enter into a virtual system (Gee, 2008) that allows them to develop voice and engage in constructing knowledge with confidence. Agency is further accomplished by players designing their own avatar characters who manifest their own online persona (Barab et. al., 2005, 2007). The relationship between identity construction and success in digital gaming merits exploration for creating more supportive identity development processes and academic achievement in formal school learning.

Another support within many digital games are the assessment approaches that allow players to practice at their particular level of competence, assess use, and adjust play based on experiences. As players move across levels based on their progression of knowledge and skills,

they are provided moment-by-moment feedback which is motivating and engaging (Gee, 2008; Squire, 2006). This motivation is connected to the function of failure within gaming platforms that allow players to start where they leave off and learn from mistakes. Failures are not strictly punitive, but instead, often entice players to take more risks with trial and error approaches to pursue short and long term goals toward more efficacious play.

In many games, goals and story lines help players to connect their actions to social responsibilities and commitments outside of the game so that collaboration is part of an iterative association with personal identity formation in and outside of the game (Barab et. al., 2005, 2007). Many players enjoy the competition in the gaming context that is often extended into collaboration (DiSalvo, Crowley & Norwood, 2008; Squire, 2006). Thus, game play is mediated by social structures that impact participant behavior and learning (Gee, 2008; Squire, 2006). Within these structures there are multidimensional forms of assistance. Gee (2008) termed these “distributed cognition,” defined as “making people smarter when they combine or integrate their own individual knowledge with knowledge that is built into tools, technologies, environments, or other people” (p. 32). With this distributed knowledge players are provided with another form of support and may perceive some level of competency from the onset of play.

Game learning theorists emphasize the importance of the social structures in which digital gaming occurs. Scholars such as Barab (2005), Gee (2008), and Squire (2006) point out that a digital game in and of itself does not teach but is a “technical skeleton” that merely provides a set of engaging activities in only one aspect of the gaming context, the virtual. Thus, when studying the use of digital games for educational purposes, it is important to go beyond the “technical skeleton.” It necessitates the examination of the cultural and social processes and

contexts where the individual identities of players come together and interact outside of the virtual world of the game itself.

Cultural and social communities influence digital gamers' "interpretations, practices, explanations, debriefings and feedback" (Gee, 2008, p. 22) that are instrumental in developing a social identity. Talking about specific games with others affords players opportunities for reflection and interpretation. Gee identifies these interactions as "communities of practice" or "affiliation groups" where learners' experiences are shaped by the established practices, knowledge, and skills of that community. Bogost (2008) and Gee (2008) suggest that these affinity groups are subset groups in relation to learners' ethnic and cultural backgrounds. They argue that games allow players to cross racial and ethnic borders that have been socially constructed and often pit groups against each other. This game "community" encourages diverse groups of students to transcend some cultural affiliations and form new ones with diverse people. There is also an empathy building potential through participation in gaming communities and cultures that offer inclusive multiethnic experiences and perspectives. Bogost (2008) proposed that game play offers "possibility space" where new ideas, inventions, and forms of expression can be actualized. The implication is that players influence each other's thinking and behaviors.

Social processes vary across contexts (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003) and digital game players. Miller, Hengst, and Wang (2003) examined studies that support the idea that "play is constituted differently in and across cultures" (p. 114). Based on this theory, it follows that different cultural groups interact differently within and outside the digital game, and therefore generate different sociocultural contexts. Gaining further understanding of the experiences and social context of an informal learning environment where students of diverse cultures engage

with digital gaming inform and assist the development of CRI. Research of this kind illuminates how students make sense or meaning while using digital games as co-constructors of knowledge and helps to identify culturally based needs and interests.

There are several aspects of digital gaming contexts that align with the aims of CRI. The CRI learning context should be one where traditionally marginalized students are provided instructional supports that enable them to experience empowerment and success so they develop confidence over time (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Lee, 2007). Technology games can be used to restructure the teacher-student relationship so that the student is the “knower of knowledge” as players take active roles in elements of the game. This can assist them in developing their voices to engage in the discourses of constructing knowledge with confidence.

Cooperative learning activities such as that typical of many digital games is a preference among many culturally diverse students widely acknowledged in multicultural scholarship (Bennett, 2007; Deyhle & Swisher, 1997; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009). This preference lends itself well to games that include forms of built-in collaboration inside and outside of the game. Learners who have traditionally experienced marginal success in traditional school environments may have the opportunity to transform their identities into ones where they see themselves as empowered to take action and experience success.

Various game-based formats can offer alternative forms of meaning making to students with different learning styles. Students learn through hands-on-experience, simulations, and demonstrations, thereby accommodating those who learn best through contextualized, experiential learning (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997; Gay, 2010). Gaming technologies that can be designed and programmed to engage students in multiple ways can extend or adjust the gaming

experience to address the individual needs of learners as suggested by Gutierrez and Rogoff (2003), thereby making experiences more culturally responsive to individuals or groups of students.

For this study, the group experience of digital gaming was identified as a socially meaningful experience to examine. Orellana and Bowman (2003) contended that race, ethnicity, and class are generally treated as static and are often essentialized in research. Instead, they should be treated as dynamic cultural toolkits that people cultivate over time and experiences. Preset social categories handled as fixed entities often categorize individuals and groups together in pan-ethnic identities such as Latinos or Asians. Since different aspects of identity work together and in relation to particular experiences over diverse contexts, Orellana and Bowman (2003) proposed that researchers identify and construct new social categories for analyzing and comparing differences based on experiences.

This study extended a pilot that examined the socio-cultural interactions of thirteen adolescent males in an after school digital gaming class. The research question was, “How do secondary school students of diverse ethnicities, and from working class urban environments, interact with commercial digital games, other players, and the instructor in an informal learning environment?” This question was posed to address theoretical issues pertaining to culturally responsive instruction and game learning theory that emphasize the importance of communities of practice. An examination of the forms of communication and the roles participants assumed in their digital gaming community suggested contextual factors impacted identity constructions that motivated and supported learning of complex gaming strategies as opposed to inciting resistive behaviors and apathy toward learning as is often the case in formal school environments

(Cleveland, 2011; Ferguson, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999). In particular, male identity seemed to be central to the gamers in this environment. Findings from the pilot study of the digital gaming context suggested that digital gaming knowledge and performance provided a kind of alternate form of acceptable masculinity performance within that socio-cultural context.

1.3 Problem Statement

In traditional, formal school settings, male students of color often struggle to maintain a balance between their personal and social identities and the academic demands of schooling. They sometimes devise coping strategies that conflict with school expectations and generate punitive consequences to the detriment of learning. The situation is exacerbated when cultural clashes also exist. Not immune to cultural representations of difference that proliferate racial stereotypes and myths, school personnel may unwittingly frame difference as deficient. The hidden curriculum of schools, often guided by a colorblind perspective, enacts rules aimed at controlling the bodies, beliefs, and lives of students, or what Ferguson (2001) described as a kind of institutionalism versus individualism. Prevailing institutional ideologies of schools are often at odds with those of students from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds. Rather than accommodation, assimilation is the prevailing operational mode that leads school staff and policymakers to assume that discipline problems and academic failure are attributable to personal choice, and individuals are exclusively accountable. They overlook the possibility that institutionalized ideologies that shape their operations and structures may be complicit in counterproductive processes.

Clashes between institutionalism and individualism are further complicated when the individuals are young males trying to validate and perform their male identities. Studies have

shown that school age males often feel forced to comply with normalized masculine performances that entail competition for power and status through displays of behaviors like toughness, fighting, and sexual talk (Cleveland, 2011; Connell, 2005; Ferguson, 2001; Kehler & Martino, 2007; Kimmel, 2008; Phillips, 2005). These masculinity performances have been termed “male gender strain.” Of the three types of male gender role strain, Gutzwiller (2009) pointed out that adolescent boys generally experience the most severe one, “trauma strain,” since they are subjected to the most acute form of pressure to conform to male gender norms. Kehler and Martino (2007) found that boys who resist contextual pressure were able to perform their masculinity in culturally and socially acceptable ways to their peers. There has been little research that focuses on identifying acceptable masculinity practices among different groups of males that can inform how to create effective learning environments across different contexts (Cleveland, 2011).

As suggested by the work of Heath (1983), investigations of contexts outside of formal school settings may produce deeper understandings of the socio-cultural processes that shape behaviors of students as they construct identities. Scholars of culturally responsive instruction (CRI) such as Gay (2010), Ladson-Billings (2009), and Lee (1993, 2007) have made compelling cases demonstrating the necessity of bridging the outside worlds of students with the academic world of formal schooling. Digital gaming environments present such an opportunity that few scholarly works currently address. Game-based learning scholars Johnson (2005) and Squire (2006) suggested that game-based pedagogies that provide learning opportunities through designed experiences offer ways of being and worldviews that traditional forms of education pedagogies frequently do not.

Members of minority groups are challenged to acquire the cultural capital of the prevailing mainstream. Gaming literacy can be viewed as a form of “dominant cultural capital,” that may be beneficial for successful navigation of societal institutions. It stimulates interest in technology and science skills among some gamers. This is more prevalent among members of elite gaming communities that cultivate very specialized bodies of knowledge and expertise. Entry into such communities and their mentoring requires physical access to computer hardware and high speed Internet connections. These resources are often out of reach for poor and working class populations who primarily use home console video games. It excludes these populations from social interactions that enable them to become more fluent in digital gaming literacy (Everett and Watkins, 2008; Pinkard, 2010). Studies that explore the social processes within communities of digital gamers from minority and working class backgrounds can add to the knowledge base for devising strategies for expanding the cultural capital in digital gaming among such groups.

Some game and education researchers have suggested that interest and engagement with digital gaming can be used in academic instruction in the science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) disciplines (DiSalvo, Crowley, & Norwood, 2008). For example, Kafai (2006) applied a constructionist perspective to teach STEM disciplines through designing and building digital games. In addition, Annetta (2008) pointed out that one of the aims of the Serious Games Movement that officially began in 2003 is to promote using games in teaching and learning in a variety of ways. Such games provide unique methods of instruction for academic disciplines, particularly science. Given this instructional potential, more research and practice are needed to develop effective pedagogy when using digital gaming, and possibly increase interest in STEM

disciplines, particularly among diverse populations of students who are underrepresented in those disciplines.

Researchers also are challenged to investigate possibilities for expanding knowledge and understanding that can assist in devising strategies for guiding young game players in thinking critically and reconceptualizing knowledge constructed through game playing. Young gamers also need guidance in reading representations of hegemonic ideologies that are proliferated in many popular digital games (Bogost, 2008; Everett & Watkins, 2008; Squire, 2006). Game playing is participation in ideological worlds that represent particular points of views. Stereotypical dominant discourses about race, ethnicity, gender, and social class are reified in many games. Players are subjected to this popular media pedagogy that when left unchecked, they have no guidance in making sense of games as interactive text. Through research efforts the content knowledge of games can be reformed and games redesigned to focus on political and social issues that are important in the lives of gamers.

An important issue for CRI is that as new gaming literacies and communities of practice are forming, there is a shift in learning preferences among many young people to include preferences for simulation learning (Squire, 2006). This raises a question of equity pedagogy in formal schooling when it does not make adjustments and creates a mismatch between the learning styles of students and their instructional experiences (Gay, 2010; Lee, 2007; Moll & González, 2004). Research that can support instructional techniques to accommodate students' changing needs brought about through their wide use of gaming and technologies are essential.

1.4 Purpose of Study and Research Questions

While the participants in this study were from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, digital gaming within their social group appeared to provide them with a sense of belonging. By examining the beliefs, social relationships, and everyday practices within a community of young, male digital gamers, patterns of identity formation may emerge. These understandings of social, out-of-school funds of knowledge may help to better support the learning of underrepresented adolescent males in formal schooling. Yip (2008) suggested that context should be examined at multiple levels to determine various interactions among gender, ethnicity, and racial identity.

The approach taken in this research was partially influenced by transformative multicultural education theorists who reject assimilationist and deficit models of education (Banks, 2010; Bennett, 2007; Gay, 2010). It was also guided by the cautionary counsel of Indigenous research theory, that according to Wilson (2008), warns researchers about the fallacy of identifying problems that mask attempts at assimilating people with different worldviews than prevailing mainstreams. Wilson (2008) explained that the capitalization of the “i” in the term “Indigenous” is politically significant as Indigenous people throughout the world have united in reclaiming the term as part of an acknowledged similar history of colonization. Guided by Indigenous ideology, the intent was not to seek strategies to remake diverse males in the image of those who have historically oppressed their cultural groups. Instead, it was to assist in making room for diverse preferences of moving through learning experiences in different contexts.

Results of this study were partially meant to reveal institutional structures that impact adolescent male identity development in positive or negative ways, and to contribute to transformative knowledge that can inform action toward equity schooling. To explore this issue,

the guiding question for this study was, “How do digital gamers construct selfhood within an informal learning context and across other social contexts?” Related questions that allowed probing more specifics regarding identity formation are,

- 1) How is digital gaming and the contexts in which it occur, sources of identity construction?
- 2) What function does the informal learning context of digital gaming play in constructing racial and class masculinities? What social identities are activated and most salient across contexts and situations?
- 3) What individual knowledge do the gamers bring to the gaming context? How is this knowledge privileged or suppressed in the gaming class?
- 4) What ideological contradictions exist between the institutional learning environment of the gaming class and those of the adolescent males in terms of identity formation? How are such contradictions negotiated? How do these negotiations compare to those that generally take place in traditional formal schooling?
- 5) How are study participants perceived and guided by adults in the learning context that impact their identity development? How is childhood mapped onto the participants of the gaming class?
- 6) What languages and/or symbols are used in the gaming context that constitutes group identity in terms of gender, race, and/or social class?

1.5 Conceptual Framework

This study drew from theories of Culturally Responsive Instruction (CRI) and game learning theory as explicated in Chapter 2. Ethnographic techniques were employed to collect

data from a variety of sources while using an iterative approach to data analysis. The methodology that provided the rationale for the appropriateness of this particular interpretative research inquiry was based on portraiture. Some facets of the analytical framework of Critical Race Theory (CRT) also guided this inquiry.

A flowchart that represents the conceptual framework of the trajectory toward the creation of new knowledge in the fields of CRI and Game Learning Theory is presented in Figure 1.1. The left side of the chart represents the foundation of this study as it begins with the individual study participants and their relationships within sub-groups, and the whole group. Each individual entered the context with his unique life experiences, knowledge, values, and beliefs that were shaped by cultural influences. Each person expressed these characteristics through his own voice and form of expression. These were captured and portrayed from interview and observation data, and by developing abbreviated individual portraits that are presented in Chapter 5.

In the upper and lower areas of the center of the chart, are the two contexts in which the study participants engaged. Data were collected in these contexts that focused on factors within the digital game and outside of the game. While they are represented as separate, they are connected through reciprocal processes. What happened inside the digital game had implications for what happened outside of it and vice versa. Contextual elements in each context needed to provide sufficient supports so that participants would continue to participate and sustain the social system, which is represented by the center icon of the chart. These contextual factors were developed using criteria from game learning theory and CRI.

In these situations the study participants worked to increase their competencies in game playing knowledge and skills, and in their individual representations of self. The upper right side of the flowchart represents individual perceptions of competency that gamers evaluated based on measurements of their extent of cultural capital, acquired knowledge and skills, and communication interactions.

Assessments of individual competencies impacted the construction, development, and salience of identities. This concept is represented by the box entitled “Identity Constructions and Development” on the right side of the chart. How gamers perceived themselves and others influenced their behaviors and performances of their identities. Concurrently, their perceptions influenced their reactions or counter actions to support individual competencies. The two-way arrow between “Individual Competencies” and “Identity Construction and Development” represents the reciprocal processes between the two. This system of interactions influenced the other reciprocal processes of the inside and outside contexts that helped build and sustain social structures within the group of players.

Data were required to develop a detailed portrait for analyses of the gamers constructing their male gender identities as they learned. Data collection targets needed to focus on the contextual elements across situations, reciprocal processes, resources used to attain individual competencies, construction and salience of identities, behaviors, and performances of identities.

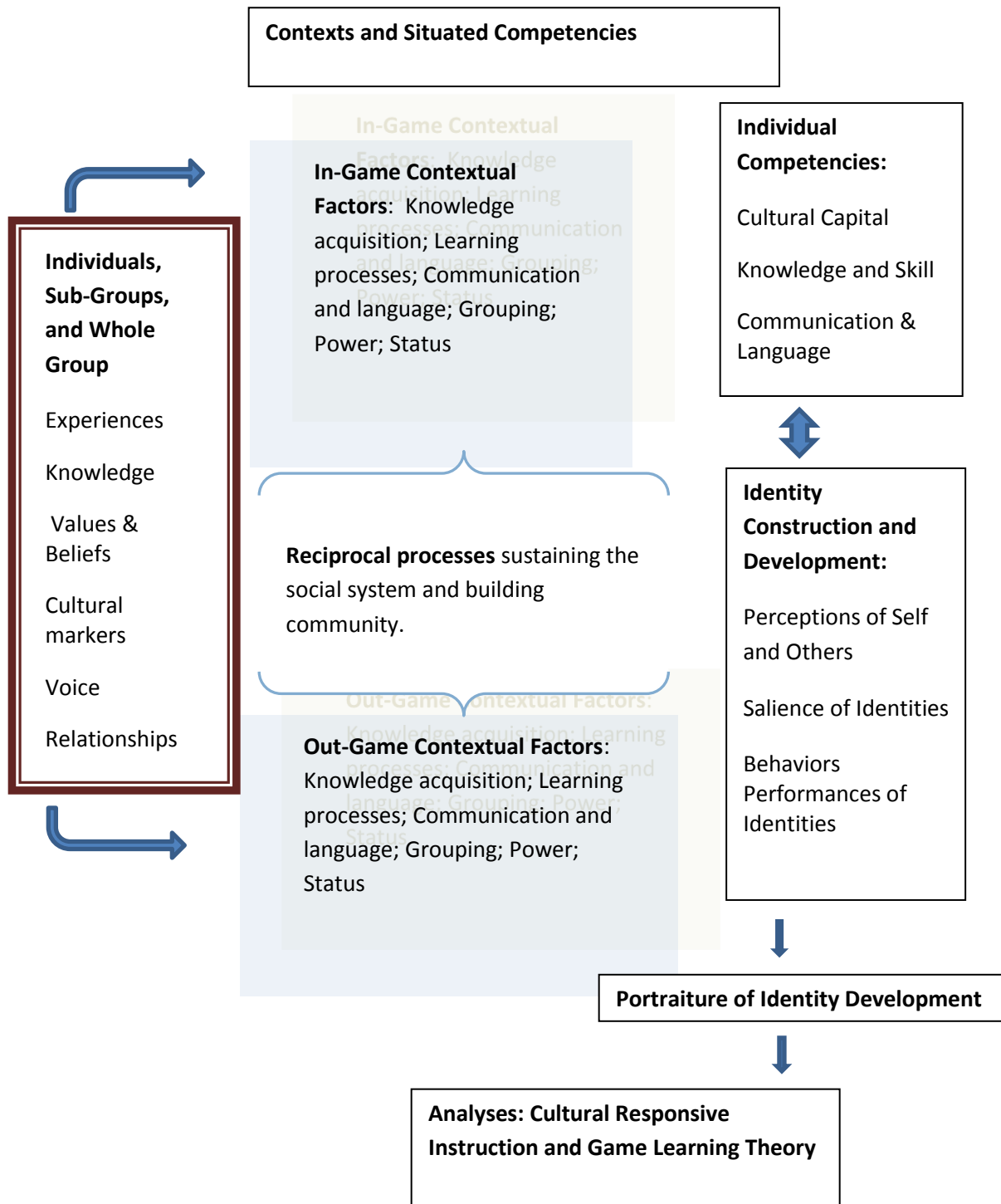


Figure 1.1 A conceptual framework for the research of males constructing identities in a digital gaming context.

1.6 Assumptions, Limitations and Design Controls

One assumption of this study was the most salient identity for the gamers was their male gender identity. This assumption was made based on theories of identity formation among adolescent males. Another assumption was that reciprocal processes of the contexts could be recorded that supported gamers' positive assessments of their individual competencies and led them to construct, develop, and perform their male identities to their individual satisfaction. This assumption was made based on the successful three-year history of the gaming class that attracted and sustained the interest and participation of young males.

As the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, researcher biases are more likely to occur in a study of this design (Hymes, 1982; Merriam, 2009). Given the centrality of the portraitist role in shaping the story, Lawrence-Lightfoot (2005) cautioned, "The counterintuitive must always be present even as the portraitist takes full advantage of the intuitive" (p. 11). This idea guided the vigilance in identifying other sources of challenge to the researcher's perspective and the practice of continuous critical self-reflection and member checks.

Given the five-month duration of data collection, the breadth and depth of data were limited. In addition, as a case study findings are not generalizable. However, the ethnographic techniques used in this study yielded rich descriptions of a group of youth engaged in complex social interactions. The research data generated were anchored in real world situations that are illustrative and expansive of a knowledge base for creating rich, descriptive portraiture. Vivid images of phenomena allow readers to apply findings to their particular cases for transfer of knowledge and applicability. Findings also can potentially lead to further inquiry and research.

1.7 Summary

Ideologies that shape the sociocultural processes within formal school environments are often at odds with the way males of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds construct gender, racial, and social class identities in out-of-school settings. On-going clashes between contextual elements in formal school environments and that of male identity enactments of many minority males seems apparent given the official records of disproportionate disciplinary actions and failures to foster and develop the intellectual capacities of many minority males. By focusing on contextual spaces where a group of ethnically diverse urban males successfully engaged in complex individual and group learning processes, this study was an attempt to gain transformative knowledge that could guide transformative education action. Learning game scholars contend that aspects of digital gaming are promising educative tools, yet there is little research and scholarship on digital games and ethnically diverse populations. In addition, these theorists have provided convincing arguments that support the notion that digital gaming processes can provide educative support systems that closely align with aims and principles of culturally responsive instruction (CRI). Such gaming supports often empower and develop confidence and positive self-images among players. Thus, this study was an examination of digital gaming contextual factors that could illuminate how knowledge acquisition can be tied to identity construction processes that motivate and support learners from diverse backgrounds. Ethnographic techniques were used to collect data that could address multiple levels of contexts. From analyses of the data a portrait of participants constructing their male identities in digital gaming contexts inside and outside of the digital game was developed. The portrait is meant to allow the reader to “see” the interconnected processes of learning and constructing identities

across the gaming contexts where fewer clashes in identity development exists, and ultimately offer new possibilities for improving learning and development across contexts.

This introduction chapter is followed by a review of the scholarship in Chapter 2 which includes descriptions of learning game theory and CRI, preliminary explanations of portraiture methodology and Critical Race Theory (CRT), a discussion about formal school experiences for minority males, and explanations of identity theory that were used as part of the analytical framework for the findings of this study. Chapter 3 is specific to portraiture research which requires descriptions of the diverse contexts of the research study. These contexts included the researcher's personal context, historical context, the study site context as it is reshaped over time, and the internal context. In Chapter 4 more details of portraiture methodology are provided along with additional research questions and a plan for data collection to address those questions. Chapter 5 begins to report the study findings by introducing the individual study participants so that the reader begins to "see" a portrait of the individuals who make up the group of gamers. Reporting of the findings is continued in Chapter 6 with a compilation of gaming class interactions that were arranged to develop the portrait of the digital gamers constructing their identities. Finally, in Chapter 7 a discussion of the findings is presented and concludes with implications and suggestions for practice and further study.

Chapter 2

EPISTEMOLOGICAL CONTEXT: A REVIEW OF SCHOLARLY WORKS

This review of scholarship begins with an overview of the theories that inspired this research, Culturally Responsive Instruction (CRI) and game learning theory. Then literature that supports the methodological paradigms used in this study, portraiture and Critical Race Theory (CRT) are discussed. Scholarship related to the education experiences of young males in formal educational institutions is the third focus of examination. Finally, an explanation of identity theory from which an analytical framework was derived is provided.

2.1 Cultural Responsive Instruction (CRI) and Game Learning Theory

Analyzing male identity development within the context of digital gaming was influenced by the thinking of learning game theorists, multicultural and culturally responsive educators, and critical race theorists. According to Ayers (2010), Cochran-Smith (2004), Gay (2010), Ladson-Billings (2009), and Lee (2007) teaching is contextual and situational, so there is power in culturally responsive instruction (CRI). The term “culturally responsive instruction” is often used interchangeably with “culturally responsive teaching” or “CRT.” “CRI” is used here to distinguish it from critical race theory for which the acronym “CRT” is also used.

According to CRI, education practices that do not accommodate the heritages and experiences of ethnically and culturally diverse students can lead to discontinuities in behavioral norms. These differences may include males who follow “The Boy Code,” which dictates acceptable behaviors specific to the group that are often detrimental to learning in schools (Cleveland, 2011). Students must be given the opportunity to learn through their own cultural frames of reference or at least be guided through processes that can assist them in negotiating

those frames of references. Digital gaming is now a part of the routine lives of many young people, especially males. Given its potential as an instructional tool for accessing situated experiences and multiple trajectories of meaning making, educators cannot responsibly ignore it.

CRI is characterized by Gay (2010) as multidimensional in that it constitutes “content, learning context, classroom climate, student-teacher relationships, instructional techniques, and performance assessments” (p. 31). Moreover, it is empowering and transformative in that it respects and uses the cultural differences of students. Gay added that there is a “semiotic relationship” among communication, culture, teaching, and learning. It follows from this line of reasoning that an examination of the relationship between communication and culture, and the multidimensional aspects of pedagogy is appropriate when analyzing the social and cultural context of digital gaming. This relationship can impact how students construct and perform various identities.

Scholars of CRI emphasize the importance of connecting instruction to the everyday lives of students (Ayers, 2010; Cochran-Smith, 2004; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Lee, 1993) and providing opportunities for them to participate in familiar activities as a bridge for learning new content. A related concept is what Lee (2007) called “Cultural Modeling” that aims to make “ways of engaging in the work of the discipline familiar” (p. 29). The implication is if digital gaming is familiar to male youth of color it is important for those who teach them other knowledge and skills to understand that particular social context. Lee contended that everyday cultural knowledge, or “tacit knowledge,” is a powerful learning tool that often remains inert. The examination of the social processes involved in playing digital games may inform the development of pedagogy that addresses cultural mismatch and identify opportunities for under-achieving male students of color.

Game learning theory also informed the conceptualization of this study. Scholars of digital educational gaming, such as Gee (2008) and Squire (2005, 2008), pointed out that new gaming technologies are generating new types of social configurations or “communities of practice” (Gee, 2008, p. 22), where participants take on a “social identity” that is an essential element in learning. Gee (2008, p. 23) explained that,

Good learning requires participation--however vicarious--in some social group that helps learners understand and make sense of their experience in certain ways. It helps them understand the nature and purpose of certain goals, interpretations, practices, explanations, debriefing and feedback that are integral to learning.

Gee (2008) framed contemporary learning theory and game design in what he called the “Situated Learning Matrix” that includes goal-driven and identity-focused experiences. To accomplish the goals of a particular identity, a player learns specific content knowledge through a support system of “tools and technologies,” as well as problem solving activities inside and outside of the game that are often social interactions. This provides opportunities for students to engage in the social construction of knowledge. This group element of gaming is related to cooperative learning, a key feature of CRI. Gay (2010) and Ladson-Billings (2009) pointed out the efficacy of a “community of learners” rather than individual competition that forces students to learn in isolation.

Digital contextual research supports the notion that computer games provide positioned experiences where players may inhabit different identities, thereby giving them the opportunity to develop different epistemic frames of reference and multiple trajectories of meaning making through active participation (Barab et.al, 2005; Squire, 2006). Given this condition, digital

gaming education theorists contend that there is vast potential for using digital games as co-constructors of knowledge. “Context” includes a complex set of elements. There is the context within the game itself where players interact with each other. In the game, players have agency within the limitations of the game and its rules. At the same time, players bring their own individual, real-world identities into the virtual world of the game. These identities influence how they interact with the game, and with the social environment outside of the game. This constitutes still another “context.” Each context can ultimately influence how and what might be learned.

Other learning game theorists support the imperative of context in digital game playing. Annetta (2008) argued that the instructional context associated with gaming is more important than the game itself. Contextual factors such as cooperative and collaborative activities that take place within and outside of the game are key elements in determining the kind of learning that occurs. After an extensive survey of research studies that were conducted to determine the extent of learning that takes place with digital gaming, Young et. al. (2012) suggested that future research should focus on the complex interactions between players, the game, and the contexts in which they are embedded across home and school settings.

Steinkuehler and King (2009) emphasized the educative potential of gaming technologies when boys are given access to “specific game-related *practices* most efficacious for literacy and to the game based *communities* that underwrite and sustain them” (p. 2). The authors worked with boys from marginalized populations in an after school program to help them develop game-based literacy skills, and found that strategic manipulation of contextual factors makes a positive

difference in learning. They found that social structures and activities are essential factors for valued learning to occur within game platforms.

Construction of identities is another layer within the complex digital contexts. The more contemporary endogenous games approach learning as a social activity where players draw from their existing identities and experiences to engage in actions from which they make meaning. Identity is conceived as dynamic, and continually reshaped through experiences and reflections. The design of the game helps to establish a relationship between identity, the game, and the knowledge a player is expected to learn (Squire, 2006). This connection makes the content knowledge more meaningful and relevant to the learner, and impacts constructions of identity in the process.

In their work that focused on African American middle school students who played console video games in an informal learning environment, DiSalvo, Crowley and Norwood (2008) noted that most participants began playing as a group activity with family and friends. The participants were most interested in the social aspect of playing the game and engaging in competitive talk such as bragging, or “smack talk.” They also learned playing strategies in person from friends or relatives, suggesting an important social aspect connected to their gaming. This social aspect of digital gaming suggests possibilities for informing educative settings that address the need for belonging and the influence of peers among Mexican and African American adolescents.

Digital game scholarship also has presented possibilities for dealing with issues of status among peers that support greater academic success. Squire, DeVane and Durga (2008) used the game *Civilization III* in an afterschool program to engage ethnically diverse students of low socioeconomic backgrounds in critical thinking about historical concepts. They found that

students required multidimensional instructional supports, such as scaffolding within the game, instructor modeling of academic language and game strategies, and provisions of out-of-game resources. The participants made significant academic improvement when they were able to develop individual areas of expertise within the game that motivated them to pursue that area outside of the game itself. It was also important that their expertise was recognized and valued by peers. In such contexts and situations, norms of masculinity were redefined to value learning and sharing knowledge with peers.

2.2 Portraiture and Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Other theoretical ideas for collecting, categorizing, and analyzing data in this study were derived from descriptions of portraiture as a research methodology used in combination with Critical Race Theory (CRT). Together, these two ideologies are powerful tools for education researchers to use in understanding intersections among race, class, and gender in both formal and informal learning situations. According to Chapman (2007), rich portraits of these interactions can capture “the voices, relationships and meaning-making of participants, as individuals and community members, in one fluid vision that is constructed by researchers and participants” (p. 157). This is accomplished by constructing a composite of an individual or group with details of the social contexts and the events that take place. The goal of this study was to develop a composite profile of a group of teen males who participated in a digital gaming class. The portrait served as the storytelling aspect of CRT, and was subjected to rigorous analytical interrogation.

In explaining portraiture methodology Lawrence-Lightfoot (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) indicated that one important goal is to join science with art while honoring research

ethics. It is a boundary crossing that bridges “aesthetics and empiricism and appeals to intellect and emotion” (p. 7), and involves the “systematic and careful description of good ethnography with the evocative resonance of fine literature” (p. 6).

Lawrence-Lightfoot (2005) also described some of the paradoxes involved in portraiture that were apparent in various stages of this study. Its strength lies in the ability to capture contradictions of the human experience that a researcher weaves into a narrative for purposes of inquiry and intervention. One paradox is the portraitist’s perspective, “which is both everywhere in the work and is judiciously placed; it is both central and peripheral” (p.10). The researcher/portraitist has to document behaviors and perspectives simultaneously to create the story. This requires careful scrutiny of the data to decide what to emphasize and how to sequence material for the story to take shape. Lawrence-Lightfoot (2005) described this responsibility as both “reflecting and imposing, mirroring and improvising” (p. 10). Portraiture research methodology demands recognizing the positionality of the researcher. As Lawrence-Lightfoot (2005, p. 11) explained,

The identity, character, and history of the researcher are obviously critical to how he or she listens, selects, interprets, and composes the story. Portraiture admits the central and creative role of the self of the portraitist. ... The shaping hand of the investigator is counterbalanced by the skepticism and scrutiny that is [sic] the signature of good research. Through rigorous procedures and methodological tools, the researcher tries to rid the work of personal bias that might distort or obscure the reality that he or she is recording.

While “skepticism and scrutiny” were critical in this study, portraiture also provided the freedom to shape a story that best spoke to how the gamers constructed identity through the dynamic interactions of race, class, and gender as revealed by the data.

Ladson-Billings (1998) suggested that the storytelling aspect of Critical Race Theory (CRT) is perhaps its most powerful tool. When used in conjunction with other features of CRT it becomes part of a powerful framework for analyzing racism and other intersecting forms of oppressions. These other features are ideological stances that include the ubiquity of racism, progress contingent on race interest-convergence, liberal politics is counter-productive, and differential treatment based on the possession of property. There are five common underlying tenets of CRT. One is racism is not an aberration but a commonplace feature of U.S. society. Its normalcy is a stabilizing device that maintains the societal status quo (Bell, 1992; Delgado, 1995). This aspect of CRT could be used to interrogate possibilities of institutionalized racism as experienced by gaming participants in this study that are often overlooked.

Another CRT feature is the notion of interest-convergence. For example, civil rights gains for marginalized groups are spurious since concessions are only granted when they serve the self-interests of the White male power structure. Delgado (1995) illustrated this point with the example of White women who benefit the most from Affirmative Action legislation. White women are overwhelming partnered with White males. Therefore, when they benefit from better economic and education opportunities, White men benefit by association. This aspect of CRT reveals how perceived “progressive” changes affect, “Whose interests are served?”, and “Who receives the greater benefit?”

CRT also challenges liberal ideology, particularly its endorsement of slow incremental change (Bell, 1992). Theorists posit that presumed gains achieved through liberal politics need to be carefully examined. Furthermore, most people do not see these contradictions, and they do not fight for real and immediate change. CRT suggests that civil rights gains are not concrete, but only symbolic to appease marginalized groups, thereby effectively subduing aggressive protest.

Finally, CRT highlights the significance of citizenship as it relates to property. It uses historical narrative perspectives to illustrate that those with property have more citizenship rights. Within U.S. society, “whiteness” itself is a form of valuable property. Those who own it receive more citizenship rights than those who do not (Bell, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Delgado (1995) argued that the counter storytelling of CRT can serve both a constructive and destructive function. Storytelling provides marginalized groups with a voice and opportunity to name their own realities for psychic self-preservation. Sharing such stories allow oppressed groups to “create their own bonds, represent cohesion, shared understandings and meanings” (Delgado, 1995, p. 64). This cohesiveness brings strength to the out-group, enabling its members to create their own counter-reality in opposition to that of the dominant group. Counter stories also can dislodge the prevailing mindsets that justify the existing power structures. These stories are destructive in that they function to “shatter complacency and challenge the status quo” (Delgado, 1995, p. 65). The majority story is scrutinized to expose and critique normalized dialogue and stereotypes. Counter storytelling also can assist the oppressive dominant group by providing a provocative means of reflection that reveals unconscious racism and other intersecting forms of subtle oppression (Ross, 1995).

According to CRT counter stories take different forms, such as personal accounts, other people's individual and composite experiences, poetry, allegories, parables, and portraits. Whatever the format, stories provide context and history for in-depth understandings. In the past, academic writing was generally characterized as acontextual and ahistorical, and subscribed to a positivist ideology of universal truths and objectivity. However, scholars such as Code (1991) and Ladson-Billings (1998) argue that subjectivity is unavoidable. Critical race theorists highlight the personal stories of marginalized groups that speak to the racial, class, and gender hierarchical structures revealed through their firsthand experiential knowledge that warrants a common framework and "voice." As Ladson-Billings (1998, p.13) explained, "The use of voice or naming your own reality is a way that CRT links form and substance to scholarship." The form and substance come from the personal experiences and expressions of the people. The "scholarship" is what often comes into question when proposing to use the "voice" of the people rather than the accepted form of academic language nuances and style that traditionally eclipse the ideas and concepts articulated in any alternative form or fashion. Yet, stories are told in all academic disciplines (Aguirre, 2000; Bell, 1992; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005). CRT storytelling challenges the institutionalized racist structures that exclude the discourses of ordinary people who may not have had the opportunities to access the hegemonic academic language. In this study, some of the features of CRT assisted in the construction of viable explanations regarding the alternative learning opportunities provided by the digital gaming of teen males of color who are often subjected to institutional categorizations and explanations that are counter-productive to their learning.

In this study critical race theorists' protocols for creating composite counter stories and narratives were followed. The process begins with self-reflection of the researcher's own

positionality and being sensitive to the subtleties of meaning that can be derived from the data collected. Doing so involved what Solorzano and Yosso (2002) called “cultural intuition,” that allows for the extension of personal experience to include a sense of a collective experience. Bell (1992) and Collins (2000) provided models for accomplishing cultural intuition in research by including themselves in their research stories and analyses.

Like portraitists and other researchers critical race theorists give priority to primary data sources. They research existing literature specific to the focus of study then draw on professional and personal experiences to compile and analyze the data. From these analyses, they create composite characters who engage in reality-based critical dialogue, based in the research findings. As the dialogue emerges pertinent data from other fields such as literature, art, music, theater, social sciences, and law are inserted. Solorzano and Yosso (2002) explained that these counter stories are more than mere entertaining fictional accounts. Such stories enable researchers to examine how marginalized students of color “experience and respond to the U.S. educational system” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 37).

2.3 Individualism and Institutionalism in Identity Construction

In a three-year ethnographic study at an elementary school, Ferguson (2001) reported techniques, results, and explanations that were very instructive in conducting this study of identity construction among teen males of color in a digital gaming class. She found that the staff at the school labeled African American boys who frequently broke the rules as “unsalvageable.” Her findings supported Foucault’s (1979) claim that schools construct who people are through rules that identify, sort, and normalize citizens that focus on practices of “rewards and punishments” (p.53). Within such a system, students are categorized and ranked based on age,

test scores, behaviors, and ethnic and cultural identities. Ferguson found school labeling and rule systems marginalized and isolated Black males into spaces of punishment, while White middle class students were tracked through higher expectation into prestige classes. This prompted her to examine the beliefs, social relationships, and every day practices within the school to uncover who got sent to the “Punishing Room.” From her data analyses Ferguson concluded that African American boys who broke the rules were not perceived as White offenders, who were characterized as “naughty boys” in the midst of childhood developmental stages. Instead, Black boys were “adultified,” and perceived as immoral deviants in need of strict corrective treatment. Ferguson wondered how boys “fashioned” a sense of ‘self’ within such a context and designed her study to pursue this question. Her work partly inspired this study of young males of color constructing their identities in an informal learning environment where they engaged in a personal passion of playing digital games.

In traditional school settings the cultural capital of African Americans, Latino Americans, and other males of color is often ignored or demeaned. Many are ostracized to physical, intellectual, and psychological spaces where they are not educated. These phenomena are exacerbated by conflicting learning styles between underachieving males and ideologies that drive formal schooling institutions (Cleveland, 2011; Ferguson, 2001). A profound question was raised by Ferguson (2001, p. 164) regarding the “fashioning of selfhood” within the formal schooling context. She suggested that

masculinity as the nexus of identification and self-fashioning during the school day, a ritualized source of articulating power, of making a name for oneself, of getting respect under conditions where the officially sanctioned paths to success

are recognized as blocked... [masculinity] exists in a dynamic and structuring relationship with other coordinates of social identity, race, and class.

For this study the “nexus of identification” guided the collection of data to explore how the male participants articulated their power, constructed masculine identity, and gained respect within an informal learning context.

Ferguson also noted that gender acts are manifested through race as well as physical and psychological experiences, and these are often related to social class experiences.

“Troublemakers,” as characterized by Gutzwiller (2009) resist school rules through a strong affiliation and expression of their racial identities. They also perform more hegemonic masculine traits, indicative of males who are associated with problematic behaviors within school settings. Yip (2008) reported that expressions of racial identity vary across contexts and situations. This raises the question of how racial and gender identity expressions differ across the boundaries and constructs of different learning contexts. Some scholars (Kehler & Martino, 2007; Phillips, 2005) have argued that while gender formation is fluid and dynamically constructed, males police their own, as well as the behavior of other males, usually based on the accepted hegemonic heterosexual masculinity that is normalized within a given context. Adherence to the normative masculine behavior is often linked to the notion of “being cool” (Majors & Billson, 1992).

The “Punishing Room” in Ferguson’s (2001) study was a source of escape for many African American students who could interact with their friends and express themselves more freely than in the regular classroom. “Troublemakers” made a name for themselves among their peers by challenging adult rules. For analytical purposes, Ferguson categorized the African American boys as either “Schoolboys,” who acted more subdued and often “de-raced”

themselves, or as “Troublemakers,” who exhibited a high racial consciousness and performed more hegemonic masculine traits. She learned that Schoolboys were in a volatile position since they could easily be redefined as Troublemakers at any time. Many Schoolboys become Troublemakers as they move into the middle and high school grades. This study was designed to explicitly look for manifestations of racial, gender, and class identity, to determine if the participants were “troublemakers,” and if so, how they were perceived and treated in the research site. A question was whether digital gaming was a kind of “third space,” or what Ferguson (2001) described as “a random set of associations where the separations and divisions orchestrated by the school do not always exist” (p. 44). In such a space, students attempt to reclaim a sense of self, and reassert their cultural norms that are often denigrated within the official school culture. They take control of their “subjectivity,” or construction of self, through complex and dynamic interactions of race, class, and gender.

In her data collection and analysis, Ferguson (2001) used some of the phenomenological approaches to gender as described by Butler (1988, 1993) who conceptualized feminist identity as “something we do in a performance that is both individually and socially meaningful” (As cited in Ferguson, 2001, p.170). Such performances are coerced since there is a societal expectation of what constitutes “normative” gender acts. Rewards and consequences are attached to the proficiency of these performances. Ferguson suggested that “for males, the enactment of masculinity is also a thoroughly embodied display of physical and social power” (p. 171). Performances of “normative” gender acts and displays of “physical and social power” were also targets of data collection in this study of digital gamers.

In a study of a Texas high school with a predominantly Mexican American student population, Valenzuela (1999) identified issues of schooling comparable to those of Ferguson (2001). Mexican American students were subjected to school structures, policies, and relationships that amounted to “subtractive schooling” or devaluing and destroying the social capital they brought to school, especially experiences and qualities related to their “Mexicana” identities. Many students perceived school processes as a lack of caring among adults, and adopted a resistive posture of non-caring toward schooling. Paradoxically, this fueled perceptions held by school personnel of Mexican American students as not valuing or caring about education. In general, school staff failed to make the distinction between “schooling” and “education.” These misconceptions are echoed in the work of other scholars such as Gibson et.al. (2004), Hurd (2004), and Vigil (2004).

According to Valenzuela (1999) the Mexican notion of “educacion” encompasses the belief that the family must teach children the moral and ethical foundations of caring and responsible citizenship as prerequisites for all learning. In contrast, formal educational institutions tend to promote “aesthetic caring” which Valenzuela described as valuing things and academic ideas above all else. This is in opposition to the ideology of “expressive knowledge,” or relational competency, which is an important aspect of the Mexican “educacion” (p. 23). This line of thinking was employed in collecting data in this study related to alignments and clashes between possible group values and beliefs, especially since several of the participants were of Mexican ancestry.

Social grouping is another important factor for many Mexican heritage students and they often are strongly influenced by their peers (Gandara, O’Hara, & Gutierrez, 2004; Gibson,

Gandara, & Koyama, 2004; Hurd, 2004; Valenzuela, 1999; Vigil, 2004). The analysis of Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2008) corroborates Valenzuela's (1999) categorization of Mexican students into three groups, including newer immigrants who were born outside of the U.S.; "Mexican-oriented" immigrants who have been in the U.S. for a number of years and have acquired the cultural capital of mainstream schooling; and Mexican Americans born in the U.S. The "Mexican-oriented" immigrant population tends to be more bi-cultural and have better academic performance than U.S. students. These two groups were critical of each other. The more academic-oriented immigrants were criticized as "geeks" or "nerds" because they exhibited too much Mexican cultural styles and values. Through the hidden curriculum of schools, Mexican American students were taught that Mexican cultural expressions were inferior. Conversely, Mexican-oriented students criticized Mexican Americans as being too Americanized, which is reflected in their attitudes toward school and self-expressions.

Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2008) and Valenzuela (1999) suggested that instead of using a common cultural heritage to support teaching, learning, and solidarity, school processes pit one group of Mexican students against another. Opportunities to shared "social capital," defined by Valenzuela as interactions that make use of resources within a web of social relationships, were impeded between different groups of Mexican ancestry students. Rather than accentuate and capitalize on group affiliations to support learning, school tracking practices exacerbated separation among diverse Mexican cultural groups. Reciprocal group relationships that might enable individuals to attain goals they would not realize by acting alone were not supported. This illustrates one aspect of Valenzuela's concept of subtractive schooling. It was examined in this study to determine what enhanced or hindered social relations and learning for the digital gamers.

Gibson, Gandara and Koyama (2004) identified patterns and interrelationships of peers, school life, and students' academic performances among Mexican origin youth that validate the influence of peers. These authors defined "peer group" as shared and situated participation in specific types of behaviors and activities. Generally existing in close proximity and of equal status, peers often influence each other's behaviors and beliefs that impact school performance. For example, peers help shape perceptions of self. Developing a sense of self is important since individuals often perform to the labels attached to them. Peer relationships in the gaming community were another central focus of this study.

2.4 Supportive Educational Practices

Cleveland (2011) posited that personality styles heavily influence academic achievement among school students. She described four core styles derived from the Myers-Briggs Type Inventory that include:

- Sensing-Feeling SF/ Interpersonal – Focuses on making connections with others through discussion; prefers a non-competitive, collaborative and interactive learning environment.
- Intuitive-Feeling NF/Self-Expressive - Focuses on human experiences with a sensitivity to emotions and motivations of others; processes information and ideas in a non-linear way.
- Sensing-Thinking ST/Practical Doer – Focuses on the concrete world, mastery of facts, and physical action; memorizes well, and acquires and applies linear procedural information.

- Intuitive-Thinking NT/Thinker-Knower – Focuses on problem solving by applying logic based on acquisition of abstract knowledge, and prefers to demonstrate knowledge acquired.

Of these four styles, 87 percent of boys who under achieve in schools were identified as having SF/Interpersonal or NF/Self-Expressive styles. By contrast, boys identified as having ST/Practical Doer or NT/Thinker-Knower styles achieved academic success at much higher rates. Cleveland (2011) concluded that the styles of the latter group were more consistent with the essential skills required to achieve success in the formal school structures that currently exist. She identified these skills as, “The abilities to acquire, organize, memorize, and express knowledge in written form; to function well in a structured classroom; to cope successfully with objective assessment and procedural skills; and to work well independently” (p. 23). Incongruence between student styles and school structures are further complicated when the teacher-student style dynamic is in conflict. Cleveland (2011) argued that dissonance between teachers and students occurs when their styles collide. The result is conflict that interferes with teaching and learning processes.

Cleveland (2011) also explained that the influence of cultural expectations for masculine identity constructions, “stretches across demographic, racial, and socioeconomic divides” (p. 36). These expectations often negatively impact the ability of males to perform well in classrooms. Given masculinity “normalcy,” teachers often are unwittingly complicit in maintaining this condition. The result is males fear failing to live up to definitions of masculinity. This fear impacts their willingness to take academic risks or ask for help since this makes them appear weak, powerless, or feminine (Cleveland, 2011). Vygotsky’s (1978) zone of proximal

development necessitates that learners move slightly beyond their existing understandings and skills for learning to take place. Thus, the very act of learning can be threatening for a male concerned with his masculine self-image.

Pollack termed cultural expectations of masculinity the “Boy Code” (As cited in Cleveland, 2011, p. 38). This code is highly influenced by stereotypical expectations of male behavior proliferated by media representations of “soldiers, athletes, and superheroes” (Cleveland, 2011, p. 38), while intellectual pursuits are associated with being female or gay. According to Cleveland (2011) if popular media-based role models are not counter-balanced, acceptable male behavior is constricted and differences between males and females more dichotomized. Under the influence of the Boy Code, males often experience emotional fragility since they believe that options for performance of their male identities is limited to behaviors such as stoicism, acting tough, and disinterest in academic pursuits. This limits their interactions and communication with others that, in turn, restrict their abilities to develop a range of close relationships. The lack of positive role models to demonstrate the fallacy of the Boy Code contributes to the negative effects of its influence. Cleveland (2011) suggested that educators find ways to disrupt the pervasive influence of the Boy Code which entails “helping our boys to build academic and social skills along with emotional resilience” (p. 50). Based on a review of research studies, she devised “Pathways to Re-Engagement” (p.58). The six pathways are long-term, integrated, and multifaceted approaches that include support, guide, reinforce, adjust, ignite, and empower boys as they learn.

For the provision of “support,” Cleveland emphasized finding ways to make boys want to take risks in learning so that they can eventually experience the euphoria of success which can

intrinsically change attitudes about risk taking and learning. She suggested access points toward this goal that begin with establishing safe learning environments where a supportive classroom culture encourages risk-taking, and learning from mistakes through trial and error processes.

A prerequisite for the establishment of a supportive culture is a trusting teacher-student relationship that positions the teacher as an effective “guide,” which constitutes another pathway for success. One tool for building such a trust is characterized by Cleveland as the “leader coach model.” In conjunction with academic learning, teachers help boys build positive life skills such as, “leadership, responsibility, self-direction, collaboration, and organization” (p. 72). These facilitate developing a “positive group atmosphere” and “warm interpersonal relationships” (p. 71). The teacher is the guiding force in modeling and developing the group as a community.

The pathway of “reinforcement” is meant to support boys in developing communication and collaboration skills. Cleveland stated that “Mastery of the two strengths are the social fabric of the learning environment along with a boy’s sense of competence, allowing him to see himself as a capable learner in and out of school” (p. 158). This requires considering communication and collaboration as essential practices that are valued and acceptable forms of masculinity. Thus, these practices need to be embedded in everyday interactions from which boys achieve positive outcomes. Optimal conditions include repeated practice over time as boys engage in experiential student-to-student interactions for immediate social relevance.

The “adjust” pathway addresses the physical aspects of the learning environment so that male students can successfully function in it. According to Cleveland boys need physical activity, social interaction, a reduction in visual and auditory distractions, and physical comfort while they learn. This can help SF and NF learners to “develop their natural gifts and, as a result

of using these gifts, receive peer validation for the tangible contributions they make to the well-being of the class” (p. 162).

The pathway of “ignite” is meant to create enthusiasm for learning by providing authentic “active learning” which Cleveland described as strategies that help boys to “become active builders of their understanding and owners of the processes in which they are involved” p. 174). Cleveland’s conceptualization of active learning was informed by the “IN TIME” (Integrating New Technologies into the Methods of Education) Project. According to IN TIME, principles of active learning include involvement through the construction of understanding; compelling situations that are relevant and have personal meaning; direct experience to enhance attention and memory; enjoyable setting to reduce anxiety; frequent feedback to foster belief in the possibility of success; informal learning that is a by-product of the formal learning target; patterns and connections to consolidate learning; and reflection that provides insights into future learning and performance. Many of these eight principles address learning needs of SF/Interpersonal or NF/Self-Expressive learners (Cleveland, 2011).

Another important factor in the construction of male identity is Cleveland’s “empower” pathway that focuses on supporting a boy’s literacy development. Reading and writing skills are essential to academic success in formal schooling. Males who do not demonstrate proficiency in these are often viewed as uncaring, lazy, or not smart. These perceptions can intensify their unwillingness to participate in the learning processes. Cleveland (2011) recommended literacy-building activities with high personal interest to address sensitivities to lack of skill. These can facilitate rapid success which addresses fear of public failure and produces evidence of growth that build confidence to succeed. In addition, the provision of multiple supports for different

learning modalities can address boys' unwillingness to ask for support. When given choice and control, feelings of hopelessness are abated.

The cultural-ecological framework of Fordham and Ogbu (1986) is often referenced by scholars in discussions about differences in attitudes and academic performances of Latino Americans and African Americans. Both Ferguson (2001) and Valenzuela (1999) pointed out the need to move beyond Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) contention that Latino and African American youth resist traditional schooling as a form of preserving what they believe is left of their ethnic identities. Both authors contended that if the focus rests primarily on individuals, attention is shifted away from societal institutions such as schools that play a role in shaping students' learning attitudes and abilities. However, when considering constructions of identity among young males of color, both societal issues and Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) thesis are prudent to consider. Macro, mezzo, and micro system issues impact individuals' identity constructions.

In a book published posthumously, Ogbu (2008) expanded the Fordham and Ogbu (1986) thesis that institutionalized racism and discrimination contribute to the development of oppositional collective identity and culture as forms of resistance among marginalized groups of people. He argued that this thesis is often oversimplified by associating academic achievement with "acting White." Instead, it is not the academic achievement that is perceived as acting White, but the cultural and social representations one practices in accomplishing academic success that are rejected. They include cultural markers such as language and communication styles viewed as caricatures of White behavior. These ideas are supported by Valenzuela (1999, 2008) who distinguishes between Mexican ancestry students valuing education while rejecting current forms of formal schooling. An examination of an informal learning environment where

participants were free to act more like themselves outside of the confines of formal schooling offered an opportunity to test the verity of these explanations.

Ogbu (2008) also redefined the relationship between “collective identity” and “cultural frame of reference.” Initially, he considered these two concepts separately but later illustrated their interconnections. He stated that there are “processes of opposition in the majority-minority group relationship as sustaining and reinforcing minorities’ separate identity systems” (p. 9). With common oppressive experiences, groups of people use them as frames of reference for a collective experience. They look to symbols that represent this collectiveness such as language, dress, and style of communication. This group identity gives its members a sense of social belonging and is a major source of cohesion among oppressed groups of people.

While Ogbu (2008) may have intended this theory to apply to individual separate minority groups, “collective identity” may be engendered across marginalized ethnic groups when they act together as members of one social system. The participants of this study were members of different ethnic and cultural groups, yet their common oppressive experiences as minorities created a shared “frame of reference” that impacted their identity constructions. African American, Latino American, Native American, and Asian American males share some common experiences of masculine and racial marginalization. Males within those groups have generationally struggled for dignity of their masculine identities (Connell, 2005; Deyhle, Swisher & Margonis, 1997; Gibson, Gandara & Koyama, 2004; Majors & Billson, 1992; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2008).

2.5 Identity Theory

According to Burke and Stets (2009) studying the integration of role, social, and person identity provides a framework for examining how identities work at both the organizational and interpersonal levels. They suggested that,

At an interpersonal level, an analysis of the group, role, and person may help us better understand such motivational processes as self-worth, self-efficacy, and authenticity. ... It is possible that people primarily feel good about themselves when they associate with particular groups; typically, they feel confident about themselves when playing out particular roles and generally feel that they are “real” or authentic when their person identities are being verified. Research will want to test whether the different bases of identities produce these different outcomes. (p. 128)

An examination of these three “bases of identities” can facilitate analyzing social processes that impact feelings of self-worth, self-efficacy, and self-authenticity which can be understood as being one’s true self.

Scholars such as Boykin and Noguera (2011), highlight the cultivation of incremental ability beliefs and engagement in self-regulated learning activities as key social processes for enhancing self-efficacy and self-worth. With confidence that one can improve over time through initiation of one’s actions such as “observation, emulation, self-control, and self-regulation” (Boykin & Noguera, 2011, p. 57), a learner is apt to engage in more risk-taking which leads to further learning, and conversely more feelings of self-efficacy and self-worth. They cite the work

of others who demonstrate correlations between self-efficacy and higher levels of academic performance among Latino Americans and African Americans in math, science, and reading.

Dweck (2007) and Steele (2010) make a similar point regarding the connection between incremental learning beliefs and the development of self-efficacy. They point out the significance of the types of feedback and praise learners receive which impacts perceptions of competency. Feedback that focuses on the effort to successfully complete a task promotes beliefs of malleable attributions to learning outcomes. Success and failure is attributed primarily to the degree of energy expended over time as opposed to innate abilities, which supports the development of positive perceptions of self.

A focus on “role identity” facilitates understandings of the supports needed to build self-confidence and self-esteem. Attention to a “group identity” within a particular social structure informs one to the processes that draw members in and sustain their vested interest in the group and its continuation. More importantly, consideration of the “person identity” of individuals within a group is explicitly tied to identity construction. It speaks directly to the question of how social processes support the verification or validation of individually held identity standards. An explanation of some of the profound complexities of these three bases of identity is presented here to provide the rationale for use in discussion of the data findings.

The “group identity” is based on one’s belonging to a social structure and is often referred to as “social identity.” Burke and Stets (2009) credit membership in a social group for having profound influences on the way people behave. Group identity is enacted when there are social categories that are easily available to help people make

sense of situations. For example, similarities and differences can be organized into categories of gender, race, and age. Thus, social identity is conceptualized as a collection of people who are similar, part of the same social grouping, and share a group perspective.

Burke and Stets (2009) provided two major reasons people join social groups. First, membership in a group offers individuals opportunities for “self-enhancement” since they usually evaluate their own group as superior to comparative groups. Second, social identity reduces uncertainty about one’s environment with the provision of a group prototype that models the expected group behaviors and values which facilitate predictability of one’s environment. Since social groups share perceptions and expectations for behavior, members have a sense of control and agency in their environment. Their social identity in the group is verified through their enactment of shared understandings that lead to a heightened sense of belonging and self-worth. Burke and Stets (2009, p. 121) explain further that

When one is a member of a group and is similar to others in thought and action, one will receive recognition, approval, and acceptance from other group members, thus verifying their social identity as a group member; and in turn, they will experience positive feelings.

The extent of social or group identity of the participants in this study helped to explain their actions in gaining status based on shared values and beliefs.

Yuqing, Kraut, and Kiesler (2007) examined social structures formed via computer technologies and found that community design choices influence people’s actions in setting

norms for on-line groups. Drawing from social psychological theory, these authors used “common identity” and “common bond” theory to predict and explain functions of group interactions and the development of community.

Creating environments based on common identity theory attract participants who are attached to the community as a whole. Yuqing, Kraut, and Kieler (2007) explained that, “Similarity of background or expertise leads to common identity mostly when the similarity is relevant to the group’s context and functioning” (p. 389). These are “topic-based” groups (Yuqing, Kraut, & Kiesler, 2007, p. 380) such as *League of Legends* digital gamers. Groups remain intact even as individuals leave and are replaced with new people since they share an interest in the game and have a common set of goals. Common identity is developed through the implementation of three main conditions: “social categorization, interdependence, and intergroup comparisons” (Yuqing, Kraut, & Kiesler, 2007, p. 382). This type of design of a digital game can account for some of the connections gamers make across race and ethnicity. Members of identity-based groups readily take on responsibilities for slackers, but they are critical of this “social loafing” since it puts the group in jeopardy. Identity-based attachments are subject to time and space boundaries (Yuqing, Kraut, & Kiesler, 2007).

Common bond groups are “relationship based” so they include participants who are attached to individual members. As people leave the group, members who have personal connections with them will likely leave. Similarities of members and social interaction foster common bond identities. With common bond attachments, the context of what the group is doing matters less since attachment is based on individual relationships with group members. Common bond-based groups are more tolerant of slackers due to friendship relationships, but members

generally do not take on the responsibilities for slackers for the sake of the group (Yuqing, Kraut, & Kiesler, 2007).

Common identity-based group members tend to conform to group norms and welcome new-comers more readily than in common bond-based groups (Yuqing, Kraut, & Kiesler, 2007). While both common identity and common bond grouping strategies foster cohesion and commitment, they generate different behaviors in terms of group norms, content of discussion, social loafing, reciprocity, response to newcomers, and group robustness (Yuqing, Kraut, & Kiesler, 2007).

Since group identity is so closely related to social identity, an understanding of the concept of “social structure” is warranted. Burke and Stets (2009) conceptualize social systems or structures as being composed of two parts. First, they are organized networks of interconnected resources that flow and transform.

These ever-transforming resources are physical and psychological supports that assist individuals in their interactions with each other and the environment. Along with flow and transformation of resources, a second component of social structures involves people’s patterns of behavior as they interact. People occupy positions such as instructor, student, leader, and follower, and their behaviors generally follow consistent forms. Thus, resources and people’s patterns of behavior are what make up social structures that form unified wholes. Together, they constitute “action of identities” (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 97) that are organized across time and are the central focus when attempting to understand the working of a social structure and the social identities it creates (Burke & Stets, 2009).

The positions that people occupy and their respective patterns of behavior establish their “role identity.” Role identity and social identity are interrelated since people generally perform their role identities within organizations that constitute social groups (Burke and Stets, 2009). Burke and Stets (2009) challenge traditional sociological perspectives that emphasize people’s actions as maintaining the patterns of flow and transformation of social structures. They argue that the functions of people’s roles are what drive the flow and transformation of resources. Different functions that people perform are interconnected and keep the resources and transformations flowing, thereby maintaining the system of interaction. People’s interactions in social structures also are guided by “role reciprocity.” Burke and Stets (2009, p. 115) explain the complexity of this concept by stating,

When two people interact, we see these two persons as relating to each other not as whole persons but as persons relating to each other only in terms of specific roles. ... For every role that is played out in a situation, there is a counter role to which it is related. ... by extension, identities are related to counter identities.

Therefore, the “function” of the roles of the participants in this study and their reciprocity were key units of analysis.

Role-based identity enactment activates a sense of competency as self-esteem is produced through processes of “identity verification.” This is a complex series of psychological and behavioral actions in which individuals engage to produce a positive sense of well-being in a given situation based on their personal perceptions and standards of what it means to be who they are.

People's constructions of their identities are guided by standards such as those that define for example, what it means to them to be male or female. These understandings guide what people do as they take action to control perceived meanings of their identities in specific situations. Their goal is to align perceptions of their identity with their personally held identity standards. According to Burke and Stets (2009, p. 91) in the identity verification process

Individuals act to control perceptions of who they are in a situation to match the feedback they receive in the situation. A discrepancy between self-in-situation meanings and identity-standard meanings is identity-nonverification. Individuals will experience negative arousal, and they will act to reduce the negative feelings by changing their behaviors, perceptions, and at a slower rate, their identity standard.

Consequently, processes of identity verification involve using resources to manipulate "meanings." The concept of "meanings" can be understood as the "response to signs and symbols as they represent things and relationships outside of us" (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 91). A "sign" is a stimulus that is associated with something else because they occur together. A symbol is different in that it is a type of sign that has shared meaning within a shared culture (Burke & Stets, 2009).

To elucidate how identity verification processes work Burke and Stets (2009) provide a specific research example where gender identities were measured among middle school-age children using the results of a survey instrument that facilitated assignment of numerical scores. Researchers constructed the survey by first compiling thirty-four bipolar adjective scales that they determined best distinguished perceptions of differences between boys and girls. They were

able to narrow this number down to just five: soft/hard, weak /strong, girlish/boyish, emotional/not emotional, and smooth/rough. Based on their responses children survey-takers were quantitatively characterized along a spectrum with very boyish rating -3 and very girlish rating +3. Using this scale, Burke and Stets (2009, p. 96) explained what people do in response to situations where their identity scores do not match the conditions of a situation by stating,

If Billy seems to be coming across in a situation as if his gender identity score were -.8 (rather than the -1.8 that was measured for his gender identity standard), he will act in the situation to change the way he is coming across. He will change his behavior to be more masculine (more toward the -3 end of the scale) until he perceives that he is coming across with meaning value of -1.8, thus matching his standard.

As suggested by Cleveland's (2011) "Boy Code," Ferguson's (2001) "Punishing Room," and Valenzuela's (1999) "Subtractive Schooling," students in formal school institutions who perceive that their ethnic or gender identities are not verified often enact behaviors that indicate "negative arousal." Many prioritize actions so that addressing negative feelings takes precedence over learning school content and/or changing who they are, as reflected by their personal identity standards.

Connecting Billy to the Ridgeway digital gamers provides a means for interpreting identity construction processes and opens up discussion of possibilities in other social contexts. This level of analysis requires examining situations within a social structure by viewing "identity" as functioning "to alter situations in such a way that the meanings of the signs and symbols match the meanings held in the identity standard" (Burke and Stets, 2009, p. 105).

Hence, individual perceptions of the Ridgeway gamers about their male identity expressions required alignment with their individual frames of reference regarding what it means to them to be and to perform their racial and class male identities.

The concept of identity verification is directly related to “person identity,” which is conceptualized as “culturally recognized characteristics that individuals internalize as their own” (Burke and Stets, 2009, p. 125), thereby providing a basis for one’s individuality. These cultural characteristics (such as dominating, submissive, stoic, controlling, highly energetic, emotional, easygoing etc.) also provide a frame of reference for identity standards used in verification processes. Person identities are constantly activated and highly salient across different contexts and situations. In a hierarchy of identities, person identity operates like a “master identity” that influences the meanings held in one’s role and social identities” (p. 126) and influence a person’s choices (when free to do so) of role and social identities.

Since people have multiple person identities that differ in salience across situations, it is prudent to consider the most salient identities in a given context. Burke and Stets (2009), and Steele (2010) pointed out that when multiple person identities are activated in a situation, their salience and prominence are arranged in a “hierarchical control system” that they use for evaluative and action purposes. The person identity that is most important to an individual in a particular situation is at a higher level of control. It sets the standards and goals of the lower level identities that determine what actions will be taken to verify the multiple identities that are activated. When one or more of the activated identities cannot be verified, or the identities clash within an individual, the social system is put under stress. Change must occur in the system and/or the individual’s identity standards (Burke & Stets, 2009).

As suggested by sociology and psychology scholars (Connell, 2005; Gurian & Stevens, 2005; Gutzwiller, 2009; Kehler & Martino, 2007; Kimmel, 2008), young boys are beleaguered with the stress of living up to macro (hegemonic) and micro (local) standards of masculinity. Following this line of thinking, gender identity likely controlled the standards and goals of the other lower level person identities of the Ridgeway gamers, including ethnic, racial, and class identities. These “subordinate” identities can be viewed as being “in the service” (Burke & Stets, 2009. p. 136) of the higher level gender identity.

Social theorists commonly agree that there are multiple constructions of masculinity that are dynamic, constructed in everyday life, and highly influenced by institutional and economic forces (Kimmel, 2008; Yip, 2008). Gender is not preset but influenced by social conventions that are constantly in flux across social contexts (Connell, 2005; Kimmel, 2008). Connell (2005) provides several examples of research studies that support the idea that political and capitalist interests play a profound role in constructing masculinities as aggressive and controlling. This is evidenced through masculinity constructions in entertainment, corporate, and sport industries. Social institutions systematically indoctrinate young boys early on with patriarchal values, aggressive male gendered toys, and the exultation of the sports world which is a highly competitive hierarchical structure (Connell, 2005; Kimmel, 2008).

Critical Race Theory (CRT) adds explanations of the ubiquitous nature of racism. When this phenomenon is combined with hegemonic constructions of masculinity, long traditions of racist prescriptive enactments of the masculinities of brown and black men emerge. Just as Ferguson (2001) and Gutwiller (2009) asserted that gender acts are often related to one’s race and social class experiences, Connell (2005) elucidated this phenomenon by citing arguments

from scholarly works such as Robert Staples' (1982) *Black Masculinity* which includes a critique of the capitalist system that exploits the bodily strength of brown and black laboring males. Those who can handle backbreaking work are exalted for proof of their "toughness," while middle-class masculinities are influenced and measured by a different standard. White-collar labor has historically been represented by White men who receive messages of male-worth that emphasize brains over brawn.

Connell (2005) lists the attributes required for heavy manual labor as, "strength, endurance, a degree of insensitivity, toughness, and group solidarity" (p. 55). Latino and African American males have historically been relegated to professions of physical labor. Even in professional sports where a few males of color have gained substantial economic headway, physicality is valued over academic mentality. CRT scholars view this "progress" as an example of "interest convergence" where males of color make some economic gains while simultaneously benefiting the White power structure through their enactments of stereotypical masculinities.

Yip (2008) provided a theoretical framework from which to examine the fluidity of racial and ethnic identity performance. Citing "self-complexity theory," he posited that individuals adopt a set of different identities to form a unified sense of self. These social identities are organized hierarchically, and one or more is activated or made salient based on the context and the relationships with others within a given situation (Burke & Stets, 2009; Yip, 2008). Yip expanded on this concept by describing optimal distinctiveness theory as a means of determining which aspects of the self are salient in a given situation and context. This theory illustrates the complexity of identity processing. An example is how people can choose identities that

differentiate them from others while simultaneously providing them with a sense of belonging in a given situation.

However, the hierarchical control model does not negate the salience of the subordinate identities. Burke and Stets (2009) suggest that “self-complexity theory” provides a conceptual framework for thinking about activation of multiple identities. Identities that share aspects of meanings and perceptions are likely activated and verified simultaneously. For example, Stets (1995) connected gender role identity to the person identity of “mastery,” which is the need to control one’s environment. When individuals perceive this to be happening, this aspect is verified for both gender role and person identities.

2.6 Summary

This chapter explains how and why the theoretical framework of this study was informed by multiple academic epistemologies. Portraiture and CRT guided the research plan for the collection, categorization, and presentation of the data. Education and learning theories guided thinking about effective learning environments and strategies that address the needs of diverse learning modalities. Sociological theories assisted in thinking about the complexities of the social systems that impact individuals and identity constructions in learning environments. Specifically, sociological psychology provided identity theory that guided the analysis of the study findings. Aspects of identity theory assisted in examining the socio-cultural processes of males constructing their identities within the social structures of digital gaming.

Chapter 3

CONTEXTUAL ESSENTIALS IN PORTRAITURE RESEARCH

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) described the essential elements of portraiture research as context, voice, relationship, emergent themes, and the aesthetic whole. This framework guided the selection of data collection strategies and analysis in this study of how male youth of color construct identity within an informal digital gaming class and other social settings. Five types of contextual data were collected including the researcher's personal context, historical context, the study site context as it is reshaped over time, the intellectual framework context, and the internal context (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Personal context is "the researcher's perch and perspective" (p. 50), which means the positionality, stance, and biases of the researcher. They begin with recording initial observations and impressions, and descriptions of how they change and evolve over time. Historical context explains the origins and beliefs of organizations as conveyed through signs and symbols within the physical environment, and descriptions of the organization by participants and mass media. Such descriptions in the final portrait introduce central themes. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) emphasized the need to look for symbols and metaphors within the study context. These are generally gleaned from repetition in observations and reflections, can assist in uncovering significant meaning, and should be highlighted as central themes in the portrait. The researcher also needs to determine how the context is shaped over time, and how the research participants experience these contextual changes or consistencies. By understanding these varied forms of contexts, the research questions can be explored through analysis of the collected data.

An "intellectual framework" context of research consists of four parts. These are

- Review of relevant scholarship.
- The researcher's previous experience in the site and similar settings.
- General knowledge of the field of educational research.
- The researcher's autobiographical journey as it relates to the themes of the study.

(Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997)

These contextual elements are required for the development of the “researcher’s template” that guides the “angle of vision...and data collection” (p. 186). Lawrence Lightfoot explained further that,

This template may be fairly explicit and well developed [or] more implicit and abstract...the dimensions...are part of the researcher’s anticipatory schema...Making the anticipatory schema explicit (in the form of memos, journals or self-reflective essays) allows for greater openness of mind. (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 186)

An in-depth knowledge of the natural social settings of participants is necessary in portraiture research because it provides clues for interpretation and meaning making. This “internal context” includes specifics of the study site such as the geography and demography of the neighborhood. Since portraiture requires descriptions that move from macro to the micro views, in this study detailed vivid images were recorded during many of my visits to the neighborhood where the gaming glass was located. Throughout the field experience, I continued to collect various kinds of information that were used to construct internal contexts essential to this study of identity development among a group of male youth of color in an informal digital gaming setting. Lawrence-Lightfoot’s and Davis’ five contexts were reconfigured into four, three

of which are described in detail next. These are community, gaming, and researcher, respectively. The epistemological context was described in Chapter 2 which addressed the research and scholarship pertinent to this study.

3.1 Community Context

The Ridgeway Community Center, the site of this study, was tucked away in an industrial enclave of a neighborhood located on the fringes of a major Pacific Northwest city of the United States. To get there from the downtown area, one who is not familiar with the intricacies of the twists and turns of the surface streets would most likely travel south on the major interstate that runs through the city. There is an exit off the interstate highway marked with little fanfare that takes the traveler to an area of business parks filled with office buildings and parking lots. From there, navigation to the Ridgeway neighborhood is still not straight forward. It requires a bit of an insider savvy to avoid missing key turns and passage ways. From this exit, one must travel across the only available bridge that hovers over the polluted river that has been featured in the local news in recent years. Attention usually is given to its high pollutants, as well as the collective actions being taken to clean it up. The air and top soil have been contaminated with heavy metals from decades of nearby industries, so that Ridgeway is the most polluted area of the city, and residents suffer from more health issues on average than any other neighborhood. A major movement continues to clean up the high levels of toxic chemicals present in the Ridgeway neighborhood. Much of this effort was initiated as a result of the unified outcries of residents of the local community.

The neighborhood was annexed to the city in 1907. From the beginning it was plagued with problems that inspired the unified actions of community citizens. Together, residents fought

for adequate city services such as a clean water supply and a workable sewage system. This is a historical trend that continues today, a united struggle for the health of the environment and community.

Once there was a second bridge one could travel to get to and from Ridgeway, but it was ancient and unsafe according to city engineers. There were no public funds to finance its repair so it was closed indefinitely, and the small businesses located nearby were rendered lifeless. Most visitors to the area follow the city signs reading “Refuse Station” after crossing the single bridge left to travel. The signs take a visitor along backstreets, and curvy roads lined with shipyards and warehouses, both abandoned and active. Just before turning onto the major arterial that runs through the center of the Ridgeway neighborhood, there is a large parking area where the city sanitation trucks sit quietly alongside each other in wait of the next day’s rounds.

South in the United States holds symbolic meaning for many people. For me, it often conjures up the idea of “down there,” the opposite of “up here,” (north). The same can be said of the neighborhoods that are located in the south end of this particular Northwest city. They are neighborhoods “down there” where the real estate prices are lower than that north. Green trees and paved roads are often replaced with steel and railroad tracks, primarily traversed to move consumer goods in and out of the city. Distinct concentrations of people of color and poverty become more noticeable in this “south,” remnants of local historic default apartheid systems. In more recent years, there has been some blurring of boundaries of these systems, but there are still neighborhoods known for higher concentrations of poor African, Asian, and Latino Americans. The Ridgeway neighborhood is highly diverse, yet it is dominated by one particular ethnic group. About one-third is Latino, primarily of Mexican heritage. The remainder of the community is

one third European American, and one-third mixture of African, Native, and Asian Americans (U.S. 2010 Census).

My first visits to the Ridgeway neighborhood several years ago were to make dump runs when I needed to discard debris generated from house repairs. No doubt I was uncertain of the way but I managed to arrive to my destination by following the “Refuse Station” signs that were far more plentiful than signs that read “Ridgeway Community.” One summer I went to Ridgeway for a different purpose. I worked with a group of other volunteers and Ridgeway neighbors to build a house in one week under the direction of Habitat for Humanity, a non-profit organization with a mission to help provide affordable homes. The experience prompted me to see Ridgeway with an expanded vision that eventually took me back there years later with a wider lens and purpose.

The main arterial of the Ridgeway neighborhood, Ferndale Avenue, is lined with a mix of two story apartment buildings and single family homes, as well as occasional small business establishments. At one intersection is the small city library that is across the street from the fire station. A mural nearby is painted on the side of a building with a sign boldly across the top, “Ridgeway Community.” It is filled with bright light from a smiling sun on the horizon. Huge fish jump from the blue, clean waters of the surrounding river as small boats splash along. The mural is a vision for Ridgeway’s future. Turning off to the east of Ferndale is one of the city’s refuse stations where vast areas are piled with recycled metal, glass, and plastics. There are also dark industrial buildings of brown, gray, and black. Most appear to be no longer in use but there are still several that house mostly industrial manufacturing businesses.

Driving straight down Ferndale without turning off in either direction will take a visitor to a four-way intersection. Very few cars ever turn left at this spot since it leads to the unsafe bridge that was closed indefinitely. Turning left would be a dead end if it did not lead back into the streets lined with people's homes and the community center. Turning right at this intersection takes a visitor to a second major arterial, mostly lined with commercial spaces, some occupied with small businesses, some deserted and closed. There are three Mexican food restaurants, a car repair shop, and Subway Sandwich shop. According to the website of the Ridgeway community, there are other businesses sprinkled throughout the neighborhood. The website lists small businesses and the languages spoken at each establishment which are mostly bilingual Spanish and English, and one Italian and English. There is one business that boasts to be the only Guatemalan bakery in the state.

Further down the street there is a gas station and minimart store with windows displaying various advertisements and prices. In the parking lot off to the side, there sits a big white food truck with displays of signs of, "Tacos \$1.25." I stopped there one day and read the menu posted on the side. The woman in the truck slid open the serving window and began speaking to me in Spanish. I smiled and told her "I'm sorry, I don't speak Spanish." She smiled back and immediately asked me, "What can I get for you?" For a moment I had been viewed as a member of this community. Then I had to open my mouth and admit the truth.

In the past decade a group of residents in partnership with city officials worked to improve and sustain the Ridgeway neighborhood community. They developed an action plan and time table that mobilized members of the community to take action to address major concerns such as environmental safety, business development, youth development, and public safety. A

primary nexus from which these actions occur is the Ridgeway Community Center, a branch of the city's Parks and Recreation Department. The Ridgeway Community Advisory Council is made up of citizens and staff who meet monthly to plan programs for neighborhood citizens and families. Programs range from health and fitness events to neighborhood socials and cleanup gatherings of public spaces.

Turning off Ferndale to the west, there are mostly single family houses with grass yards that line the streets. Most are modest in size and design, a few larger with more amenities such as a garage, second floor, and large yard. This is the side of Ferndale where the Ridgeway Community Center looms large with its sprawling playfield spread out in front. During the winter months, the field is dark and deserted but in the spring children and adults congregate across the field for baseball and soccer practices or games. The people reflect the diversity of the Ridgeway neighborhood; people of all hues and ages, and occasionally there is the sound of laughter and people speaking Spanish.

3.2 Personal Experience in the Research Site

My first experience at this study site began when I visited the Ridgeway Community Center to practice storytelling with young people. A few years later, while seeking a study site with digital gamers, I contacted the same acquaintance who had invited me to practice my storytelling. A staff member mentioned a digital gaming class where boys came to play once a week and seemed to be "addicted to playing." The two-hour class took place in the center's computer lab. The class was for "teens," between the ages of 13 and 18, yet only males participated on a regular basis. They played *Warcraft III- Defense of the Ancients* (aka *DODA*), a

strategy digital game. Most of the students were of Mexican heritage and the instructor was an African American male in his late twenties.

I conducted a pilot study at this site with the digital gamers. The purpose was to examine the social context of this structured learning environment with digital gaming for a group of low socio-economic students from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The 13 students who participated in the class over the observation period self-identified as seven Mexicans, two Cambodians, two African Americans, one Samoan, and one Native Sioux and Mexican mixed ethnicity. Over the course of the two-year period that the class was offered, Mexican American students comprised at least half of the group. The findings from the pilot study suggested students had opportunities to construct and manifest identities that motivated them to learn and support the learning of their peers. This motivation seemed to be a product of a collection of contextual elements both inside and outside of the digital game and the class. The present research was a follow-up to the pilot study to conduct a closer examination of those contextual elements and the identities constructed by the participants within the contexts.

After completing the pilot study I had discussed with the gaming class instructor interest in doing some follow up research that would involve having the participants in the class tutor me in one-on-one sessions for which I would provide a small monetary gift. I initially entered the gaming class as a volunteer since it also was designed to assist participants with homework. I visited three times but only assisted two boys with an academic task. My initial impression was that gamers attended the class to play a particular digital game, not to engage in homework or academic tasks. They were supposed to do 30 minutes of academic work where I could be of

assistance. However, most rushed through or complained during the task. This was something that I had also observed during the pilot study 18 months earlier.

As a volunteer, my “perch” was across contexts within the community center itself. I had volunteered to assist during two Halloween events and had also visited the community center to observe two sporting events. This was done in an attempt to begin to construct an image of the gaming class participants outside of the class and in other contexts of the community center. The first night I came to volunteer, two of the gamers told me to come watch them play since they were good players and I would learn a lot. Over the course of my volunteer visits, it became clear that the gaming class instructor, Luc, had already shared with the participants my tutoring and monetary gift plans.

When I entered the gaming class as a volunteer, I sat in an office chair wheeling from one player to the next, looking over the shoulders of the players. This provided an opportunity for the participants to become more accustomed to my presence. The gamers became so engrossed in their game play that they hardly noticed my presence. Occasionally, I asked a question and the player answered absent-mindedly, or glanced at me with an annoyed expression.

The class was held in the community center lab, a small room approximately 10’ x 20’. About 12 computer desktops lined two walls in an L-shape configuration. Only half of the computers could be used for the digital gaming class. The other half was designated for academic or homework use only. I observed children using these computers for the intended purpose. However, these computers were connected for Internet access and children left to their own devices sometimes strayed.

After my research proposal was approved by IRB, I began to record observations of the gaming class which had been temporarily moved to a software store. The instructor of the class had located a Microsoft location where digital game tournaments were held and he entered his players in the competition. The group did well and the store management offered to host the gaming class for ten weeks, and provide free instruction in game strategies. The store facility could accommodate ten players at one time while the community center computer lab could only accommodate six players. In addition, players were provided a laptop computer while playing the game, and they sat in a horseshoe configuration of long folding tables. Behind them, an enormous wall monitor replayed the game activity after a two minute delay. This was a great improvement over the small computer lab at Ridgeway. Luc, the gaming class supervisor, transported the gamers in the Center's government issued van and drove them across town during rush hour to one of the city's more opulent shopping malls to the Microsoft hosted class for the ten weeks.

When I entered the gaming community for the second time as researcher, I already had some preconceived notions of the setting and its participants. This was primarily a "male" domain. While there were sometimes other females in the Ridgeway Community Center's computer lab at the time the gaming class was conducted, they generally paid little attention as the gamers engaged with the game and each other about the game. As a researcher and female, I suspected that the participants would eventually come to view me as being outside of the game playing circle. However, because of the tutoring and monetary gift, I was placed in a power position that initially provided enough status or curiosity to be noticed.

I began data collection in the Microsoft store by keeping field notes of what I saw and heard, and later added reflections on my initial interpretations. As the gamers played, I either sat in front of the horseshoe configuration with the enormous screen facing me, or I took a similar position as I did at the Ridgeway computer lab behind the players looking over their shoulders and listening to what they said to each other. Initially, I knew little about the digital game even though I had observed the class three times before as a volunteer.

Once I obtained the required signed permissions of the study participants, I assumed the role of “student,” engaging in one-on-one tutoring sessions with each participant. These tutorials were held on Saturday afternoons with two different gamers for a two-hour session each. In the tutoring sessions, the power positions were not completely neutral but I made attempts to negotiate power, while still requesting that the tutors teach me certain aspects of the game in specific ways. For example, during one of the first sessions, I requested that the tutor take me through the tutorial program provided within the game. He agreed to do so but advised me, “People really learn to play just by playing games.” After the tutorial, I acquiesced to my tutor’s insistence on playing a game while not understanding what was going on in the game I was “playing.” With each tutoring session my knowledge and skills progressed in small increments and I adjusted requests of my tutors to address issues for which I needed clarification. I also reserved some time to engage in conversational interviews with my tutors to get to know them better as digital gamers, school students, and members of social peer groups.

3.3 Gaming Context

When I first approached the instructor of the gaming class with a request to reenter as researcher, the class was being held at the Ridgeway Community Center in their computer lab.

By the time I entered as a researcher the class had moved temporarily to a Microsoft store located north of the downtown area of the city. The context of the class moved from the familiarity of the local Ridgeway community to the foreign terrain of a middle and upper class location in a different part of the city. The participants were no longer “down there;” they were on unfamiliar territory, “up there.” What was familiar to them in this foreign setting was the game and their passion to play. Most times they were so engrossed in playing the game that they showed little awareness of this very different context. What was different was their interaction with other digital games in the store prior to the start of their digital gaming class. Their experimentations with different games throughout the store engaged all of the participants.

Over the course of my weekly observations, it became apparent that the participants had been coached on expectations for their behavior while in the store. During the 6th week of the class, one of the boys became frustrated and cursed. I learned the instructor had made an agreement with the group that a condition of their participation would be paying a fine of \$10 for cursing in the store. This was not a condition for participation in the computer lab at the community center. However, I had doubts that this rule would be enforced.

The digital game the participants played during the duration of this study was *League of Legends*. It is an online digital game that is free to anyone who has a computer and Internet connection. Various guides, chat rooms, and blogs exist that can be accessed to assist players in learning strategies and particulars of the game champions. Champions are the characters a player chooses to control in the game. There are more than 90 different champions from which a player can choose. Each champion has his or her own unique set of four abilities that are controlled by the letters q,w,e, and r on the keyboard, or by clicking on them with the left side of the mouse.

This set of particular abilities empowers the champion in different situations within the game. Some champions can do battle in close range and others from afar. Some take a lot of shots (damage) but do not deal very heavy blows to their enemy. Characters with long range weapons can shoot the enemy from a distance but typically are not able to take a lot of enemy shots without being killed. Killing an enemy champion gets a player different types of points; some in the form of strength for one's own champion, and some as gold used to buy items in the game "shop" that enhance the power and abilities of the champion the player controls in the game. Accomplished players learn the abilities of this wide range of different champions. Players also learn the particulars of a multitude of items available for purchase based on the money (points) they earn while playing the game. The better one plays, the more items one is able to purchase to play. The challenge becomes even greater since aspects of the game are modified periodically by the game designers.

The gamers in this study demonstrated a remarkable ability to remember names of champions and the general abilities of those individual characters. These abilities raise possibilities for teaching academics that require memorizing extensive content.

To play against other virtual players, a game is created by one player who then invites others to play in the game. One team plays against another team with up to five players on a team. If there are not 10 real people to join the game, the game creator can add "bots" which are computer controlled champions. The word appears to be short for "robots." Playing with bots is generally not ideal in a situation since team members cannot converse to plan actions to take against the opposing team.

Players have 90 seconds to choose a champion, the spells that provide special abilities to the champion, and the “runes” that enhance the champion’s abilities. This time constraint is still another motivating factor to learn the aspects of the game beforehand. Players who are more experienced generally have a better chance of playing with the champion of their choice. By earning points over time, players can earn the right to play with specific champions that they “buy” with their earned points, or with real money. Newer players will not possess such rights, or they may be limited to the least desirable champions. Once a champion is “bought” with game points or money, the player can buy “skins” for that champion using real money. Skins are costumes the champion wears in the game. These costumes do not enhance the power of the champion; they are merely for appearances. This is something akin to buying an imposing outfit for a super hero. Some of the gamers value skins, especially the younger ones in this gaming community, because they make the champion look “cool” and are possibly intimidating to opponents who say to themselves, “Oh, this guy must be good. He has skins and has probably been playing a while.” Most of the older players said about skins, “I’m not into the game like that.” Or, “It’s a waste of money.” However, each gamer had purchased at least one skin for his champion.

Once champions are selected along with their spells and runes, the players wait for the game to activate, which takes a couple of minutes. While waiting, team members can type messages to each other about where each of them will take their champion once the game begins. In this community of gamers, team members were in the same room, generally sitting next to each other. Sometimes they would whisper to each other. However, most of the time they used the “chat box” so that their opposing team could not hear their battle plans. The game is set on “the battlefield of justice” that is referred to as a “map.” In the lower right corner of the screen, a

miniature map of the entire battlefield is shown which enables players to see what is happening everywhere.

Team members generally communicate with each other to decide who is going where on the map. There are three different lanes team members can take to get to the enemy base. The first team to get to the enemy camp and destroy it wins the game. The *League of Legends* Website explains the object of the game and the challenges to players in completing the task:

Once you have chosen your initial ability and items, it is time for you to choose a lane. Since you are just starting out, try to choose a lane with a partner. Deep within the enemy base, near their summoner platform, lies their nexus. Victory is achieved through the destruction of the enemy team's nexus. Guarding the nexus are several turrets that are placed at even intervals in separate lanes. You have to push your way through these lanes in order to reach the enemy nexus. In each lane, however, you will undoubtedly run into the opposing champions and their minions. A minion wave is a group of computer controlled warriors that spawn from your nexus to assist your assault on the enemy base. The minions, however, are relatively weak on their own, and will need your assistance in order to deal with the enemy champions.

The game guides use extensive vocabulary, some of which an average secondary student does not use on a regular basis, such as turrets, minions, and nexus. The gamers in this study embraced and used the exclusive language of the gaming community fluently. During my tutoring sessions with the participants, I was required to learn the language of the group.

I observed the gaming class at the Microsoft store seven weeks out of the ten weeks that it was held at that location. During that time, I met with two participants on Saturday afternoons, and occasionally one on a week night, for one-on-one tutoring in the game and interviewing. One of the most striking changes during the Saturday sessions was the activity in the computer lab. During the first and second Saturdays, only the two participants with whom I had scheduled my appointments were present. By the third week, several of the gaming participants came and wanted to play the *League of Legends* game while my tutoring sessions and interviewing took place. At times it became necessary for a participant to sit with me in a private and quiet location during the interview.

3.4 Researcher's Context

My interest in locating and making sense of the goodness among the experiences of young males of marginalized groups began with my history with my brother. He once told me, "You can't play with me and my friends anymore. You're a girl and my friends don't want girls to be hanging around with us. You should be playing with girls anyway." I was stunned by my brother's words. We had always played together and I had never thought twice about it. Yes, he sometimes complained when I played marbles and his friends teased him that his sister shot marbles better than he did. But it had never occurred to me that there would be a time when they would not want me to be a part of their play group. Why couldn't I continue to shoot basketballs in our driveway with my brother and his friends? I was ten, maybe eleven, years old and I could almost shoot as well as some of them. Didn't I have a right to continue to play with them? Leaving me out didn't seem fair. Were they that jealous of me? And why didn't my brother stand up for me? I had been with him as his playmate long before those guys came along. From my

earliest memories, it had always been, “me and Eddie,” “Eddie and Missie.” Who were these boys to try to come between us?!

“There’s a good movie on TV today. It’s a Tarzan movie with Johnny Wisemiller.” I was four years old when my brother made this announcement to me. Eddie was older by 18 months and much more knowledgeable, already attending kindergarten while I stayed home and anxiously waited for his return. “You know who Johnny Wisemiller is?” Of course I didn’t know who anybody was outside of our own household and immediate family. “He’s the best swimmer who ever lived cause he won the Olympics.” I distinctly remember thinking to myself, “Olympics???” My brother correctly read my facial expression, something we became very adept at with each other. “The Olympics is a big contest where people come from all over the world to see who the best in sports is. Johnny Wisemiller was the best swimmer for us. America won the Olympics cause of him.”

Most of my brother’s education came out of the black and white TV set that he would lie in front of on his stomach, his face between his hands while propped up on his elbows. Ensnored, he soaked up details from movies and television shows of which I only paid cursory attention. I would lie next to him on the floor watching Tarzan, “sword-fight,” Flash Gordon, and war movies because that is where Eddie was, what he was doing. Through my older brother I learned a lot about the world. After watching a war movie he was quick to inform me that the main character, Audie Murphy, was “a real-life WWII hero who killed a bunch of Germans.” It was not unusual for Eddie to engage in conversations with adults about what sparked his interest on the black and white TV set. He posed questions to adults to gain more details, or he shared his

own expertise about a subject. I was often in awe of his ability to discuss topics with adults about subjects I knew little to nothing about.

By the time I entered kindergarten, I had learned from Eddie, “America” had fought two world wars and won. A world war was when all the countries in the world were in the war. I knew there were places across oceans of water where kings and queens like Julius Caesar and Cleopatra used to live but died long ago. Eddie had taught me more about the world than anyone else, even more than my parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles. I had spent more time with him than with anyone else. He had always been my primary and often times only playmate. Like many siblings and playmates, we argued, fought and often competed against each other. “Unguard!” Eddie challenged. It was a term he plucked from a movie on the black and white TV set. I obliged by engaging in still another sword-fight in the backyard with a felled branch from the gigantic tree. Most often I was stabbed with the tip of his stick, “I killed you again” he would brag. He was older and a boy; he expected to always win.

My mother often recounted the story of me learning to walk and talk sooner than any of her five children. I was my mother’s second child, following my brother, Eddie. According to my mother, as an infant, I wanted to do everything that I saw Eddie do, such as walk, talk, and ride a hobby horse before I could sit up on my own. My mother’s third child was my younger brother, Lowell, who came three years after me. I was the middle child between two boys who were my playmates and comrades in adventurous and sometimes mischievous endeavors. My two brothers were with me when there were no other children with whom I could laugh, live, and learn. As a military family, we moved from one place to another but my two brothers represented one of the few constants in my life. During the first decade of my life, Eddie especially

represented a steady and comforting presence. He was a confidant and teacher who challenged me physically with sword fights, sport games, and wrestling matches. Intellectually he challenged me with checkers, chess, and a barrage of facts about the world that he took great pleasure in telling. He read complicated comic books with big words that he happily explained to me as he recounted every detail from the pages of action packed, science fiction based publications such as *The Fantastic Four*, *The Green Hornet*, *The Avengers*, and *The Incredible Hulk*.

When Eddie developed close friendships with other African American boys in the 6th grade, his announcement that I could no longer be part of his male group was a heavy blow to me. I could not understand why his friends wished to exclude me. I remember feeling a sense of betrayal by both Eddie and his friends. After his announcement, publicly I was in the background of Eddie's life, while privately he sometimes shared fragments of himself that reminded me of our earlier friendship.

As we moved through our teen years, Eddie spoke of particular male friends with admiration and sometimes repeated comments his friends made that he thought were particularly clever. Yet, I often found these comments sexist and offensive. I wondered how Eddie could say things that were disrespectful toward females, toward me, and toward our mother. This seemed to be still another betrayal by Eddie, brought on through relationships with and learning from his male friends.

When Eddie and I participated in mixed gender, teen group activities, he often seemed like a puppy dog around the more popular African American boys. He seemed to hang onto their every word, laugh too quickly at their wit, and linger too long in their presence. It was as if he

was lost in their presence and his relationship with them. Over time, I saw his love for reading, his curiosities, his questioning of the workings of the world wane until it seemed as though those parts of him had never existed. I made futile attempts to “bring my brother back” across the border of a place where the allure of his connections with male friends took precedence above all else. I was insignificant in such a place where he could no longer see or hear me.

My history with my older brother is one source of my intrigue with identity and relationships with peers and communities as powerful influences in teaching and learning. This power is more complex than the notion that we learn from each other. What and how we learn are connected to who we are and who we want to be. Who we want to be is connected to our relationships with particular people who we see as pertinent in defining and sanctioning that identity. For me, Eddie’s “transformation” illustrates that identity is fluid and connected to what we value, and what we choose to learn.

This power of identity and relationships in teaching and learning was further highlighted during my experiences as a high school teacher. In a large urban high school, I taught in an academic tracking system that included two general history classes where the majority of the students were African Americans and mostly from working class backgrounds. To round out my schedule, I had three humanities classes with four or five students of color, the remainder were European Americans, mostly from middle class backgrounds. The humanities classes were college tracked for students who were preparing for higher academic pursuits. I often found myself comparing the humanities classes to my two sections of general history classes. I especially paid attention to the males in these classes.

As a new teacher I took an additive approach to multicultural education (Banks, 2010; Bennett, 2007). I followed a traditional curriculum, focusing mostly on facts straight from the textbooks, with other materials added to represent the experiences of diverse groups of people. The humanities students thrived with this approach. I remember groups of White males sitting on the edge of their seats as I returned graded papers. They interrogated any question marked incorrect, compared scores, and boasted among themselves about who could remember more facts and get the highest scores. Their social group of males assigned value to obtaining the highest scores among them. It seemed this value signified academic achievement and life success, and was a source of competition for status among their male peer group. In my general history classes, I did not see the same value and status for scores among the African American males. I distinctly remember some of them telling me, "I only need a 'D' to pass." As an African American woman, I found that disturbing and began to search for explanations to better prepare me to teach diverse groups of students, particularly males.

Later in my career while teaching in an urban alternative school that enrolled 75% non-majority students, I was haunted by my past with my brother, Eddie. Numerous "Eddies" sat in my classes. These were intelligent African American, Latino, and Native American males whose imaginations I attempted to capture with a social justice curriculum in the midst of overwhelming counter-influences, including approval from male peers. During my years at the school I saw glimpses of what can happen when male peer groups develop interests and place value on particular learning pursuits. One such instance happened when a young African American male tutor was introduced to me by another male who had graduated from the school. This 20 year old man had an African name, was well read, and seemed to have a one track mind focused on academic scholarship. I was dubious about his ability to connect with my students as

I believed they might perceive him, in their language, as a “nerd.” I decided to take the risk. He spent a great deal of time with the males in my classes and I was heartened to see that most of them welcomed his attention and time.

Once this tutor and his friend challenged a group of male students with a taunt that went something like, “You all talk about how Malcolm X was a hero and you wear his name on your clothes, but have any of you even read him? Have you read his autobiography!?” This tutor convinced the principal to make a special book purchase so that he could conduct an after school book club. Although there were times I overheard him lecturing the boys about not completing assigned readings, I was surprised to see that five or six boys regularly attended his all-male book club. As I passed through *my* classroom during their sessions, I sometimes heard them engaging in serious discussions about issues that were of importance to them, and spawned by the book. These were young males who generally did not read outside of the classroom under my leadership. I could only surmise what was different. The experience was reminiscent of my brother’s words, “You can’t play with me and my friends.” While this was not play, it was teen males of color doing something together that was meaningful, valued, and embedded in relationships having to do with male identity.

These male students were challenged by a male presumably with higher status, who had questioned their African American male identities. As a group, supported by a leader and each other, they were willing to confront the challenge by participating in a book study, and perhaps garnish what was determined by this particular group as the right to express themselves in specific ways as Black males. I had challenged these same students many times before with very different results. This tutor connected with the male students within a boundary that I could not

cross. It was a connection that went beyond our shared African American heritage, and had something significant to do with their shared African American maleness. This male leader within the group had exposed deficiencies in something the students were expected to know as Black men within the social group. At the same time they were given an opportunity and needed support to reaffirm that identity in the form of a book club led by an affirmed and accepted African American male who was a constant in their lives and their micro community.

Another episode in my growing concern for male identity and education was the time I became a tutor for the Men's Basketball Team of the University of Washington while attending graduate school. I again experienced an exclusion from a male peer group community who chose to learn from each other what was important to learn. Within this community, a valued male identity was modeled by the upper classmen on the team for the entering freshmen. I witnessed many contradictions as these young men negotiated their male identities. A young man who went along with my suggestions during our one-on-one meetings, adopted very different demeanors and actions in the presence of his teammates. The presence of teammates for some of these young men seemed to induce a split personality that resulted in the construction of borders that I could not, nor others outside of their circle, penetrate. These borders excluded outsiders based on gender and ethnicity, and defined acceptable maleness based on high visibility as athletes. For example, one kind of learning that was valued and reinforced as acceptable male identity was mastery of basketball skills that took a player to "the next level" of professional basketball. Second string players who did not have the knowledge of first string players held less status as basketball players and in terms of their male identities. For many of these males more time was spent learning basketball skills than academics. As one of the older players with high status within the group put it, "Academics just gets in the way." I floundered in my efforts to challenge,

and perhaps broaden their views regarding academic pursuits. Many of them had been groomed by multiple social messages that sports were their best hope for achieving success and respect. Some were seduced by the notion they would be millionaires by simply doing one of the things they liked to do most, compete in a game they enjoyed playing. Working hard at academic pursuits might only lead to a job they would likely not enjoy and offer little else in comparison to the anticipated athletic fame.

One young African American student athlete came to my office one day and could barely stay awake. I commented, “You look so tired. What time did you get to bed last night?” He admitted he had not gone to bed until after three in the morning. He had gotten so involved in playing a video game that he had lost track of time. My first reaction was anger. Here I was trying to support him in successfully navigating the challenges of being a full time student athlete and maintaining his grades at an academically demanding university, and he was spending his time playing games. Later I wondered, “How can educators harness the power of digital gaming to attract and sustain the interest of young males who are so distracted from the academic responsibilities of schooling?” The Athletic department had been trying mentorships with older males who had been student athletes. We made attempts to educate these young men in the value of being academically successful. Yet, it was clear we were not able to meet the challenge for many of them. This reality also set me on the path toward investigating and possibly harnessing the power of digital gaming technologies in education that cumulated in the present study.

Shortly after these experiences with athletes I made the decision to leave the classroom, at least for a while, rather than continue to spin my wheels with what I viewed as my least

successful endeavors as a teacher. That is, failing to tap into the genius of low income males of color, particularly African Americans. Admittedly, there were times when I placed the blame on my students. I was working hard, and from my perspective, they were not. This may have been a kind of coping strategy for maintaining my confidence as a competent educator. However, this approach was in conflict with my own philosophical foundations. I was the adult and professional educator and I had a responsibility to guide and educate my students who were not adults. I had a responsibility to learn how to do this more effectively for those “children” I was not adequately serving.

My first step in this direction was the pursuit of a graduate degree in technology in education. While this gave me a theoretical foundation, I struggled to meet the challenge of moving from theory to practice. I had no idea how to develop educational practice with digital gaming that attracts and sustains the motivation of young males to pursue academic learning with gaming technology. Despite my limited computer skills, I tried to design a simple computer game using the FLASH animation program. It was a world geography game that provided historical facts of places around the world that players were required to identify based on a series of hints. It was purely content driven and rewarded students based on a behaviorist theory of teaching and learning. I came to realize I needed to rely on the design and programming of games by those who were far more skilled than I. Yet, I wondered how I could contribute to the vision of using gaming technologies to support diverse populations of male students in education. I turned to the field of Multicultural Education in an effort to explore possibilities.

One of my graduate program requirements was a research and inquiry project that set me on a search for small communities of digital gamers made up of young males of diverse ethnic

and cultural backgrounds. I began the search by perusing the websites of schools and after school programs. The results were disheartening. Within my area, urban public schools did not offer any digital gaming classes in secondary schools. One urban middle school had discontinued a digital gaming class with a focus on designing games two years earlier to concentrate on teaching basic skills required on state standardized tests. I did find possibilities outside of the city in a nearby suburban community. While most of those schools did have some ethnic diversity, their students were mainly European and Asian Americans. I was looking for populations of underachieving males such as Latino and African Americans. Suburban schools would not meet this need.

Ironically, I found an opportunity that was practically in my own backyard. A couple of years earlier I had asked an acquaintance who worked at a nearby community center for the opportunity to practice my storytelling skills with groups of children who attended the center. During my search, I spoke with this same acquaintance who told me about a digital gaming class that took place one evening each week. She lamented, “If only they took such interest in their school work the way they do with those computer games.”

The class was conducted in the center’s computer lab where ten boys sat at a desk top computer while configured in two teams of five. The action took place within the digital game itself and outside of the game as well. Players called out to the instructor for his suggestions on what choices to make within the game; they called out to each other for guidance; they teased and ridiculed each other as they played; and they congratulated each other for their gaming performances. When the class ended, most of the players did not want to leave their posts at the computers. The instructor had to disconnect the power to get these gamers to leave.

I wondered about the dynamics of this small gaming community. During the initial visit, no African American players were in the class but this group was all males of color, some struggling with academics in school. Could the study of such group engagements with gaming, male identity development, and community instruction be of value to other diverse ethnic and cultural groups of males? If so, it would be another step toward increasing my understanding of using digital technologies in educating diverse populations of males, particularly those “Eddies” of my past classrooms.

3.5 Summary

Understandings of these three contextual elements discussed in this chapter (and the fourth intellectual context that is discussed in Chapter 2) provide the necessary background or canvas upon which the portrait of gamers was outlined. The Ridgeway community setting conveyed themes of marginalization that has been and continues to be met with neighborhood unified actions toward a progressive vision. Details of the digital game provide an image of the utensils gamers can employ as they construct their male identities in ways that are satisfying to them. The researchers’ personal history and experiences in the research site make her stance and biases more transparent which can assist in processes of interpretation and developing understandings of the resultant portrait.

Chapter 4

APPLIED RESEARCH PORTRAITURE METHODOLOGY

This chapter begins first with an overview of the setting and participants of this study. Second, a summary of the data sources that addressed the research questions is provided. Third, an account of the procedures used to collect data that are specific to portraiture research is described. Fourth, sequential data collection strategies are outlined. Fifth, these are followed by an explanation of the strategies used to analyze the data. Appendices are included at the end of this document that list observation protocols and interview questions.

4.1 Setting and Participants

The study site was a digital gaming class at the Ridgeway Community Center that was described in detail in Chapter III. The study participants included ten males between the ages of 11 and 19 years old. Demographic profiles of them are presented in Chapter 5. The sample of participants was purposeful according to protocols explained by Patton (2003). The participants were chosen because they are ethnically and culturally diverse adolescent males from a lower socio-economic background who choose to play digital games on a regular basis in a structured learning environment.

4.2 Research Questions and Data Collection

Digital gaming contextual research supports the notion that computer games provide experiences where players may inhabit different identities, thereby giving them the opportunity to develop different epistemic frames of reference and multiple trajectories of meaning making through active participation (Barab, 2005; Squire, 2006). “Context” includes a complex set of

elements. There is the context of the game itself where players interact with each other. In the game, players have agency within the limitations of the game and its rules. At the same time, players bring their own individual, real-world identities into the virtual world of the game. These identities influence how they interact with the game, and with the social environment outside of the game. This constitutes still another “context.” Each context ultimately influences how and what is learned.

Being attentive to these diverse contexts, the major research question of this study was, “How do digital gamers construct selfhood within an informal learning context and across other social contexts?” Several more specific questions were developed to assist in examining the major question in detail. They were formulated based on the review of research and scholarship for this study, and are summarized in Table 4.1, along with examples of the type of data collected on them.

Table 4.1: Research Questions and Related Data Collection Targets

Research Sub-Questions	Targets of Data Collection Questions & Methods of Data Collection
<p>1) How is digital gaming and the contexts in which it occur, sources of identity construction?</p> <p>2) What function does the informal learning context of digital gaming play in constructing racial and class masculinities? What social identities are activated and most salient across contexts and situations?</p>	<p>a) How do participants show evidence of being “Cultural retainers” who use adaptive cultural messages from their racial or ethnic socialization?</p> <p>b) How are culture retainers different from non-retainers?</p> <p>c) Are there socially constructed hierarchies within the digital gamer community? If so, are they related to race, class, and gender?</p> <p>d) What is the salience of racial and gendered social identity as related to situational factors in and beyond the digital gaming context?</p> <p>e) Do males monitor and manage their own behavior and that of other males? If so, what form of masculinity is normalized within this specific context?</p> <p>f) As participants verify their male</p>

	<p>identities, what other aspects of other identities are simultaneously verified?</p> <p>Data Collection Methods: Observations, Interviews, Tutoring Sessions, Document Analyses.</p>
<p>3) What individual knowledge do the gamers bring to the gaming context? How is this knowledge privileged or suppressed in the gaming class?</p>	<p>a) What knowledge do participants have about digital gaming, computing, and academic learning?</p> <p>b) What cultural ideologies do participants have about values, social grouping, relationships, and peer influences?</p> <p>c) How do participants use language(s)?</p> <p>d) How do participants use signs and symbols or “resources”?</p> <p>d) What is participants’ degree of affiliation with countries, regions, and/or communities of origin, and the nature and frequency of contact with home countries or other cultural contexts?</p> <p>e) What is participants’ current and past social class positioning?</p> <p>f) What other cultural practices or</p>

	<p>affiliations surface during data collection?</p> <p>g) How are participants' funds of knowledge used or suppressed in this context?</p> <p>Data Collection Methods: Observations, Interviews, Tutoring Sessions, Document Analyses</p>
<p>4) What ideological contradictions exist between the institutional learning environment of the gaming class and those of the adolescent males in terms of identity formation? How are such contradictions negotiated? How do these negotiations compare to those that generally take place in traditional formal schooling?</p>	<p>a) What is the relationship between the gamers' experiences and larger social processes of the community center and the community?</p> <p>b) What are the beliefs, social relationships, and every day practices of digital gaming that reveal patterns of interactions, such as rewards and punishments, related to identity?</p> <p>c) How does the institution draw on participants' everyday knowledge?</p> <p>Data Collection Methods: Observations, Interviews, Document Analyses</p>
<p>5) How are study participants perceived</p>	<p>What is the treatment of gamers in terms of their developmental stage, "adultified" or</p>

<p>and guided by adults in the learning context that impact their identity development? How is childhood mapped onto the participants of the gaming class?</p>	<p>not?</p> <p>Data Collection Methods: Observations, Interviews</p>
<p>6) What languages and/or symbols are used in the gaming context that constitute group identity in terms of gender, race, and/or social class?</p>	<p>What language preferences are used to augment race, class, and/or gender identities?</p> <p>Data Collection Methods: Observations, Interviews, Review of Scholarship</p>

Questions #1 and #2 asked, “How is digital gaming and the contexts in which it occur, sources of identity construction? and, What function does the informal learning context of digital gaming play in constructing racial and class masculinities?” To answer these questions, data were collected to illustrate how participants acted with regard to what Orellana and Bowman (2003) described as “cultural retainers” across different situations within the digital gaming context and community center. This entailed looking for possible manifestations of participants practicing ethnically and culturally socialized behaviors for coping, or to exhibit racial pride, commitment, and multiethnic egalitarianism. Exhibitions of little or no cultural retention also were recorded since they could indicate salience of diverse levels of identity across different situations.

Of special interest were situations when participants were cognizant of existing social hierarchies related to social class, roles, and status both inside and outside of the gaming class. According to Gutzwiller (2009) these kinds of status positions among males are often associated with the acceptable forms of masculinity performance. Data that illustrated how participants constructed and performed their identities as raced, classed, and gendered beings in different situations where diverse criteria of acceptability might exist also were collected.

Observational data of participants playing the digital game and tutoring the researcher were collected and compared to observational data of participants engaging in other activities in the community. Specific questions posed to gamer participants and community center staff, were intended to reveal manifestations of cultural markers such as preferred language use, self-expression, peer group affiliations, and values and beliefs across varied contexts. For document analyses, the digital game profile that was created by individual participants was examined at which time they were questioned about their preferences for game aestheticisms, mechanics, goals, and strategies.

Question #3 asked, “What individual knowledge do gamers bring to the gaming context? and, How is this knowledge privileged or suppressed in the gaming class?” Data were collected that focused on the funds of knowledge participants brought with them to the gaming class. This included knowledge of digital gaming, computing, academics, personal interests, cultural ideologies and beliefs, and use of language. While observation of participants was one source of information, data collected through interviews with gamers and community center staff who had relationships with the gamers and their families constituted the main means for addressing this question. Interview data provided insights into the varying degrees of cultural affiliations with

countries, regions, and/or communities of origin, and other cultural practices. They also provided information about the past and current social class positions of participants and the funds of knowledge they brought with them. In addition, information about their involvement in other community center and school activities was derived from interviews.

Question #4 examined the ideological contradictions that existed between the learning environment of the gaming class and those of the adolescent males in terms of identity formation and how these contradictions were negotiated. To pursue this line of inquiry, data were collected that illustrated relationships between the digital gamers and the social processes within the gaming class, and the larger social processes of the community and the community center. This necessitated recording illustrations of the beliefs, social relationships, and everyday practices within the study site that indicated patterns of interactions, such as rewards, punishments, approvals, and disapprovals inside and outside of the gaming context. Observations, interviews, and document analyses of the Ridgeway Community Center's brochures, flyers, and website provided information about how the larger institution handled participants' everyday knowledge and expressions of identities. Data also were collected to address how gamers responded to and viewed the larger institution's practices. Comparative data were collected that focused on the gaming class.

Question #5 asked, "How is childhood mapped onto the participants of the gaming class?" Data were collected that could illuminate if the digital gamers were treated like children in developmental stages moving toward adulthood, or, if and when they were treated as emerging mature beings who required strict censuring and punishment. Data about institutional practices for supporting, guiding, censuring, and punishing participants were collected through

observation, interviews, and document analyses of the community center's published materials that delineated policies and procedures.

Question #6 asked, "What language and/or symbols are used in the gaming context that constitutes group identity in terms of gender, ethnicity, or class? Data that could illustrate preferences for types of language and the forms of language used to construct identities in and out of the gaming class were collected. Observation data were collected that focused on how language was used to augment race, class, and gender within the context of the gaming class and how this was similar or different outside of the gaming context. Specific interview questions about communication and meanings were posed to address this question as well. Document analyses were conducted through examinations of the language and symbols within the digital game the participants played.

4.3 Data Collection Paradigm

This research project was an illuminative case study as described by Patton (2003) since its goal was to uncover manifestations and insights about the identity construction of digital gamers in an informal learning environment. The expectation was that the findings might reveal some insights that also could be helpful for designing more effective learning in formal educational environments.

Qualitative research requires that the researcher engage with participants closely and often to construct social meaning from their interactive experiences (Becker, 1996). Ethnographic field techniques including participant observation, informal and formal interviews, and document analyses are appropriate to examine psychological and social processes within the

social contexts (Becker, 1996; Merriam, 2009). Using these techniques in this study produced different kinds of data that addressed evaluative criteria of trustworthiness, credibility, and conformability. Extensive data were gathered and categorized to produce descriptive portraits of how the participants interpreted objects and events. Both micro and macro details were collected to provide larger contextual descriptions and capture subtle nuances to produce rich and thick details of the findings (Merriam, 2009). In addition, ethnographic methods allowed adjustments to be made in iterative and dialectical data collection and interpretation (Hymes, 1982; Merriam, 2009; Miller, Hengst, & Wang, 2003).

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) provided the framework that informed more specific data collection strategies for this study as described in Chapter 3. This framework served as a starting point for entering the field with relevant dimensions relating to digital gaming contextual factors and identity construction. As data were generated agendas, questions, and methods were adjusted to fit with the realities of the setting as the study evolved. Data collected included how participants used language and constructed identities in different situations outside of the gaming class as well. These included the community center's perceptions of the gaming participants as emerging adults, and how their funds of knowledge were treated.

Each study participant was invited to provide tutorials in the mechanics and strategies he used in his own game playing. Tutoring sessions were approximately 90 minutes, and another 30 minutes at the end for interviewing. I met with six of the gamers two times, one gamer three times, and three of them one time. The number of tutoring sessions was determined by the data collected from previous sessions, and the availability of the participants.

The tutoring sessions constituted other contexts and situations where gamers constructed and performed their identities. Data were collected on how participants communicated and interacted with the researcher in the absence of gaming peers as indicative of different constructions and salience of identities. During these sessions ethnic and cultural affiliations as revealed through styles and preferences of communication that conveyed cultural markers, values, and beliefs were recorded.

Positioning myself as a student and the gamers as tutors served two other important research functions. First, it shifted the relational power dynamics so that the gamers would be less conscious of the researcher's adulthood and outsider positions. Second, interacting with the game in the computer lab where participants normally played put them in a familiar space where they might feel more comfortable and at ease speaking as themselves. This format was intended to engender authentic communication of ways of being and perspectives. During our informal conversations, the participants were queried and prompted to share stories about their behaviors and performances of identities across social contexts such as school, home, and community.

As suggested by McDonald (2003), I hoped gain trust and evoke confidence in my honesty, integrity, and reliability. To accomplish this I was involved in other activities at the community center including volunteering and participating in community activities that were open to the public.

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) characterized voice in portraiture as encompassing three sets of ideas that include the epistemological stance about the source of knowledge, the sociopolitical stance of the speaker, and the methodological stance about the research data that is recognized and advanced. The portraitist uses diverse modalities of voice to advance these

postures. The most restrained form is “voice as witness” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 87) where the researcher observes from the side, seeing what participants are not likely to notice. From this vantage point, I observed participants in the community center, the gaming class at the Microsoft store, and the gaming class in the computer lab of the community center. I collected documents, audio recordings of interviews, video recordings of game tutoring sessions, and field notes that captured interactions between participants and the instructor, each other, and other people who attended or worked at the community center and the Microsoft store.

A second kind of voice data collection is “voice as interpretation.” In this study it included my reflections on the meanings of what was observed. Lawrence-Lightfoot described these data as gathering supplemental information in context from a variety of sources that can assist in decoding what is actually happening and what it means to the people in the environment (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). This partially entailed recording extensive descriptions of the context to create vivid imagery to help readers imagine the contextual factors operating in the research sites.

A third data voice is the “voice of preoccupation” that defines what the researcher sees and understands based on disciplinary background, the theoretical framework, and the understandings of relevant scholarship (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 95). This included selected portions of my own personal history that influenced my connections and understandings of the setting and observations of the research participants and data.

I was vigilant in “listening for voice” influences (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 99) of the participants that could reveal deeper meaning. This required my being attentive to a range of communicative forms such as word choice, silences, gestures, cadence, and tones. I

watched for possible examples that could illustrate various meanings of identity forms and influences.

Data also were collected in the form of “voice in dialogue” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 103) between the gamers and the researcher, and among the gamers. Lawrence-Lightfoot explained that these data facilitate developing a chronicle of the development of trustful relationships between the researcher and the researched. Placing myself in the center of action during the tutoring/interview sessions allowed the study participants to be the directors of the action. In so doing, I followed the advice of Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997, p. 187) that,

The researcher’s stance evolves from a quiet watchfulness...to more purposeful activities of initiating relationships with actors. With each stage of data collection, at the close of each day, the portraitist gathers, scrutinizes, and organizes the data and tries to make sense of what she has witnessed.

After each gaming tutoring/interview session, I transcribed the video and audio recordings of the interactions between my tutor and me. This helped me to recognize relationship changes over the course of my time in the field.

This study also applied some ideas of Indigenous Research Methodology. In its advocacy of knowledge construction as a communal endeavor that rests on the foundation of relationships with others and with ideas (Wilson, 2008), an Indigenous research paradigm departs significantly from traditional Western research paradigms. It is a framework that is inclusive and egalitarian. It does not conceptualize research as an individual process where the pitfalls of objectification,

exploitation, and misrepresentation of the people and things under study are present. In an effort to bridge the gap between Indigenous and Western dominant research paradigms, the research paradigm used in this study challenged the status quo, the business as usual approaches in education research and practice. This adaptation reflected an integrated knowledge of Western academic training as well as worldviews that are influenced by my own cultural group identifications. It is a paradigm designed to enrich the lives of participants who help researchers create knowledge in an effort to extend the research process (Wilson, 2008).

Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983) underscored the importance of the researcher developing trusting relationships that begin with responsibility and reciprocity toward study participants for creating effective portraits. This study did this by searching for “goodness” and highlighting strengths and insights of the participants while acknowledging imperfections. To accomplish these goals I attempted to experience the setting as the participants did so by learning to play the digital game and then playing with groups of participants. While playing the digital game, I asked myself questions such as: “What would it feel like if I were in his shoes? If I were looking at the world through [his] eyes, what would I see?”

Steps also were taken to define the external (structures and time) and internal (intimacy) boundaries of interactions to protect the vulnerabilities of the participants. This was accomplished by explicitly stating the expectations and limits of the roles of both the researcher and the researched from the very beginning. I communicated these structures in writing through assent and consent forms and verbally through informal announcements and conversations.

Reciprocity in relationships was addressed further by honoring the contributions and identities of participants by representing their truths as closely as possible. This required

following the conventions of portraiture research and giving back to the Ridgeway Center and the digital gamers by giving them small monetary gifts for their time and knowledge during the tutoring sessions.

The intent was to gain entry into the study site by establishing relationships based on authentic communication on an on-going basis. In part, the process entailed a deeper understanding of myself in relation to others. Although this study was not long enough to qualify as a “human archeology,” Lawrence-Lightfoot (1994) noted that brief encounters with research participants in research studies do not have to be superficial connections if the researcher is alert to moments of opportunity for intimacy. Playing the digital game with the study participants during tutoring sessions provided many of these moments and opportunities to build a better rapport with the participants, a necessary condition for credible data collection (Hymes, 1982; Merriam, 2009; Miller, Hengst, & Wang, 2003).

4.4 Data Collection Procedures

The digital gaming class where this research occurred was a natural setting which made it appropriate for use of ethnographic techniques of observation and interviewing for data collection (Becker, 1996; Hymes, 1982; Merriam, 2009). To collect cultural contextual data, I relied on the study participants to guide me through their own setting. Throughout the experience, there was constant calibration of assumptions as I observed and experienced the context. The observation protocol used to collect data to answer the research questions is presented in Appendix A. These observations were conducted over five months until data reached a saturation point where it began to repeat themselves.

I initiated the data collection period with a rudimentary sampling technique that included observations and informal conversations with participants in the digital gaming class and community center staff familiar with them. I identified individuals who would likely yield data that could be used to develop rich descriptive portraits for analysis. I also made observations of gamers in other activities in the community center, such as sporting events, non-digital games, holiday events, and their interactions with other people. Observations of these activities yielded data that provided details to address most of the questions listed in Table 4.1. When I entered the study site I began as an observer so the participants could become accustomed to my presence, and to avoid contaminating their behavior. Later, I moved into a participatory role when I played the digital game with the participants during some of the tutoring sessions. This helped me to gain a better understanding of the gamers' cognitive processes within the digital game itself.

At first I audio recorded whole group gaming sessions. But this process was less than ideal. It was not always possible to identify specific speakers, and the game conversations were whispered since they included strategic talk against the opposing team. Gamers were generally deeply entranced while playing the game, and they did not speak very often. Because of these conditions, it was more fruitful to stand behind the gamers as they played and listen over their shoulders as they spoke. This technique made it easier to identify who said what to whom with more accuracy. Immediately after observing the gaming class I wrote detailed descriptive and introspective field notes.

Video and audio recordings also were made of the individual game tutoring sessions, and were transcribed within a few days. The video recordings allowed me to be an observer even as I took part in the gaming as a participant. During the tutoring sessions I asked the gamers to

explain their individual *League of Legends* game profile pages. These profiles were documented records of the participants' preferences and accomplishments over time and they constituted an "artifact" for document analysis. They were a kind of student generated work that provided additional insights into how the study participants interacted with the digital game.

While reviewing recordings of individual tutoring sessions and interviews, I made written notes to describe the participants' dress, body gestures, and verbal commentaries since these could be markers of identity construction and performance. During the second tutoring/interview sessions more specific questions were posed concerning identity development in and out of the digital gaming setting. Probes were used to illicit more in-depth explanations. Some questions were formatted as role-playing and simulations as presented in Appendix B.

Another form of document used in the study was the academic records of study participants. They were required by the Ridgeway Community Center staff to provide access to their on-line academic school progress reports. The staff members were asked to describe the gamers' academic achievement based on these records. These data revealed some valuable insights about the gamers' values and perceptions of their formal school achievement.

The instructor of the digital gaming class was formally interviewed twice during the course of the study, at the beginning of the observation period and towards the end. The first interview was designed to gather data about the current state of the class; the instructor's goals for the class; information about the students who participated; an overview of the instructional strategies; challenges with the class; and curriculum that was used in the class. The exit interview included questions about the class sessions I observed and the emergent data gathered over the

course of the observation period. Appendix C lists the interview protocol and rudimentary interview questions.

Two other Ridgeway Community Center staff members were interviewed who had consistent interactions with the study participants. One person was the computer lab attendant who was a Filipino woman in her 20s. She provided details about the gamers based on what she had observed in the computer lab. The other person was one of the supervisors of the community center who was a Mexican American in her 40s. She provided information about some of the family and school experiences of the study participants. For example, she elaborated on the academic achievement and discipline history in school that sometimes contradicted what was reported by the individual gamers. As a constant presence in the center and a member of the Mexican American cultural community, she was a “partial” insider to this group of gamers.

A semi-structured format was used in all formal interviews with probes for elaboration. This allowed for systematic questioning to address topics as necessary for gathering information pertinent to answering the research questions. They also provided the flexibility needed to pursue opportunistic elicitation of data that may not have been identified in more structured formats (Hymes, 1982; Merriam, 2009; Miller, Hengst, & Wang, 2003).

4.5 Data Analysis and Emergent Themes in Portraiture.

Identification of emergent themes resulted from using iterative and generative processes throughout the duration of the data collection period in the field and afterwards (Feldman, 1995). As Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) recommended, at the start of the field experience, I began to create an “Impressionistic Record” (p. 188) to engage the “interpretive voice.” This was

a kind of speculative writing where I took varied perspectives, considered tentative interpretations, and worked through puzzles and dilemmas. It helped in making plans for forthcoming field visits. Throughout the course of the data collection, I used a dialectic approach that involved continuous coding, analysis, and reflection. These techniques are consistent with Glaser's and Strauss's (1967) "constant comparative method." Both are analytical processes that include "memoing," or writing notes to oneself that involve interpretive thinking about the data.

When completed, the data collected were organized and categorized with greater scrutiny and deeper contemplation looking for patterns. This reconfiguration was based on Lawrence-Lightfoot's and Davis' (1997, p. 189) summary of the process:

The notes are developed into a primitive outline or system of classification into which data are sorted initially. The outline begins with a search for regularities – things that happen frequently with groups of people. Patterns and regularities then are transformed into categories into which subsequent items are sorted. These categories or patterns are discovered from the data.

Revealed patterns were categorized according to the topology created by Miles and Huberman's (1994) that includes descriptive, interpretive, or pattern codes. Descriptive codes identify data that describe and interpretive codes identify data that have been interpreted. The actions of gamers were coded as descriptive. The meanings of gamers' actions were coded as interpretive. Both were identified and coded throughout all stages of data collection and explanation.

Pattern coded data emerge as common threads or themes identified over time. They involve looking for repeated phrases, actions, and scenes, and facilitate arranging data into more

meaningful and manageable units. This process of rigid coding was balanced with “voice-centered analysis,” thereby creating a kind of tension necessary for writing portraits (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 193). The process required several readings of the data while “listening” for diverse voices, especially those deviant voices” that could help me maintain the required skeptical portraitist stance. Since portraitists are so deeply steeped in interpretive and generative processes, the researcher must be ever diligent in monitoring interpretations through on-going skepticism (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Throughout data collection and analyses, I used Burke’s (1972) Five Elements of Analysis to conduct a Dramaturgical Analysis to examine all the aspects of the setting, including scene, agents, agency, purpose, and audience. This process assisted in answering questions about the data such as, “What performance is taking place? What meaning is portrayed to the audience? What is the purpose of the performance?” Since this study was concerned with adolescent male identity construction in a digital gaming setting, I was particularly interested in performances that revealed what it meant to them to be and act male.

Emergent themes developed that focused on three phenomena as described by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997). These were (1) “repetitive refrains” (p. 193) that were ideas or themes that occurred repeatedly in a variety of sources throughout data collection (2) “resonant metaphors” (p. 198) or symbols that dominated across time, space, and participants, and had a central meaning and (3) “institutional and cultural rituals” (p, 201) that illustrated the characters, values, and beliefs of the gamers as a Ridgeway Community Center group. Evidence of these was collected through close examination and triangulation of all data types including

observations, interviews, tutoring sessions, and document analyses. This was necessary for the identification of repetitive and common themes.

The data were organized and then analyzed based on schemes that emerged from the data themselves. This process began with identifying a tentative descriptive framework derived from emergent themes. The framework was then interrogated by subjecting the data to repeated analyses, member checks, and critical self-reflections (Feldman, 1995; Merriam, 2009; Miller, Hengst, & Wang, 2003). This facilitated identifying patterns of meaning making through the participants' points of view, presenting dependable findings, and extrapolating implication of the findings for identity development and CRT analysis.

4.6 Summary

The participants in this study were young urban males who were members of a digital gaming group that met in an informal learning environment. The primary research question focused on how these gamers constructed their male identities as they learned complex gaming mechanics and strategies. Several other questions were explored that could assist in answering this question. Specific targets of data collection that could produce descriptive portraiture were collected. Data analyses were on-going throughout the duration of this study.

Data collection and analyses focused on two types of knowledge. One was "the familiar" for the digital gamers in the context of their everyday experiences. This entailed examining context, climate, and the semiotic relationship between communication and culture. The second type of knowledge was connections between the familiar worlds of participants outside of formal schooling and their constructions of identity in those contexts. The assumption was that this

knowledge could be used to bridge, and perhaps occasionally challenge, students' identity constructions in other learning contexts.

The research methodology of portraiture used in this study attempted to illuminate the "essence" of the participants as they constructed their identities in their gaming spaces and community. What this "essence" means for teaching and learning across contexts is one challenge for future inquiry.

Chapter 5

PORTRAITS OF THE INDIVIDUAL GAMERS

Like the artist who begins with a charcoaled outline sketch of her portrait subject, I begin the process of “sketching out” the contours of the individual characters who made up the community of digital gamers, and participated in this study with brief descriptions of who they were and what they brought to the gaming context. Capturing the complexities of their interests, strengths, values, beliefs, and overall personalities is beyond the scope of this study. However, I have attempted to judiciously place descriptions along with the participants’ own voices in passages to sketch who they are. The lines will be “colored in” with broader strokes in subsequent chapters where a composite of the group portrait and their constructions of identities are presented and discussed.

Somewhat analogous to the game *League of Legends*, these portraits are divided into two sections, or “teams of 5 on 5.” The first team of five gamers consists of “the noobs.” Ruben, Trey, Harry, John, and Julius were the younger, less experienced players in the group. Except for John, all of them regularly attended the weekly gaming class. The second set of portraits consists of the team of older, more experienced players, or “the beasts.” These other five players used the term “beast” as if it were a verb instead of a noun. “I beasted on you,” was often a taunt after killing an opponent. This team included Wizard, Devon, Flash, Rick, and Biggie. They regularly attended the class two years before this study and returned to it as regulars when it was temporarily held at a software store. After the class moved back to the community center, they resumed their habit of rarely attending the gaming class. Two years before, these older gamers played a more complex digital game, *Warcraft III -- Defense of the Ancients (DOTA)* in the class.

That gaming experience positioned them to learn and play *League of Legends* with ease since the two games are similar in many respects.

The entire group of gamers was composed of four Mexican Americans, two Native Americans, one Salvadorian American, one African American, one Hmong American, and one of mixed Native and Mexican American heritage. Their ages ranged from 11 to 19. (See Table 5.1 for more details on gamers' demography.)

Table 5.1: Gamers' Demography

Name	Age	Ethnicity	Time Playing <i>League of Legends/Warcraft III</i>
Trey	12	Native Am./ Mexican	4 months
Ruben	11	Mexican Am.	4 months
Harry	11	Native Am.	4 months
John	13	Salvadorian Am	3 months
Julius	14	Native Am.	4 months
Wizard	17	Hmong Am.	3 years
Devon	17	African Am.	2 years
Flash	17	Mexican Am.	3 years
Rick	16	Mexican Am.	2.5 years
Biggie	19	Mexican Am.	3 years

5.1 Portraits of the “Noobs”

5.1.1 Trey.

I like winning on it [digital game] and just beating other people. I like winning against people who are really good so that I get better. If I was to play against people that wasn't that good I would probably be at the same level.

This is what Trey liked most about the *League of Legends* game. When asked why he thought more boys played the game than girls he suggested, “Maybe because there’s more violence in it?” To find out if there was more attraction than the violence of the game I asked Trey about his favorite aspects of the game. His response suggested the challenge against others and a long term goal to improve were also part of the allure for him.

My first tutoring and interview session began with Trey. Luc had to call him to remind him of our 11:00 a.m. appointment when I arrived at the Ridgeway Community Center one Saturday morning. Trey appeared in a matter of minutes. “I was already up when you called,” he announced to Luc. He arrived early enough to get a pancake breakfast that was being hosted by the community center in an outreach effort to their Ridgeway neighbors. As Luc unlocked the door to the computer lab, a boy and girl of about 8 or 9 years old were bouncing about. The girl asked Trey, “Are you teaching today?” Trey blushed and with a smile answered, “I guess so.”

Trey was in the 6th grade at a local, public middle school. When asked to identify his formal school experiences, Trey listed his grades from his last report instead. They included “Four As, two Bs, and a D in math. He explained, “I’m not that good in math, and I sometimes

fail the tests.” Two of the As were in piano and citizenship. He described similarities and differences between school and the community center by stating that,

Around here I’m allowed horseplay. But at school you can’t horseplay. And the same is like at school. You read a lot and you learn more things which is the same as here. I don’t read books [here] but I read a lot of what’s on the walls.

At 12 years old, Trey had a slender build and was nearly 5 feet tall. His sleepy, large, brown eyes belied his energy and ability to think deeply. As he played the game, his forehead creased and his lips slightly puckered as if he were in a trance. During an interview, Luc, the gaming class supervisor, named Trey as the best player among the younger group of new players. He said, “Trey is more of a team player who listens and really tries to work with you.”

Girls were already paying attention to his handsome looks and pleasant demeanor. During one gaming class, a girl was filming him on her cell phone. As she “interviewed” him she asked, “Well, do you like her or not?” Trey didn’t look away from his computer screen as he answered, “I don’t know if I like her -- I guess.” One day he appeared wearing a bright orange baseball cap that looked too big for his head. At one point he briefly lifted the cap up and put it back down. I saw that he had a buzz cut with hardly any hair left on his head. The following week, his close friend and fellow gamer, Ruben, had the same cut. Neither of them was wearing a hat too big for their heads.

Trey was the oldest of four children, and lived with his mother and stepdad. His mother was Native American and his biological father was Mexican American. Trey’s family was originally from the area and he had lived in the Ridgeway community all of his life. He visited

the community center almost daily and played *League of Legends* 3 to 5 times a week. Although he did not have a computer at home, he sometimes went to a friend's or his uncle's house to play the game.

To initiate our tutoring session I suggested we start at the very beginning since I knew nothing about the game. I had watched the gamers play a few times during their class, but I did not understand what they were doing in the game. Trey told me to Google *League of Legends*, and establish an account on the Website. He looked away when I entered my password. I requested that he take me through the first of two tutorials. I was given a choice of three game characters (champions) to control and Trey provided a few details about each of them. Once the tutorial began, he explained what was taking place. Almost immediately after the tutorial began, he grabbed the mouse from my grasp and began controlling my game champion for me. As quick as the action took place, Trey provided commentary about what *he* was doing. When I explained that I needed to control the mouse myself to learn how to play, he relinquished control, at least for a time. He took control of my computer mouse two other times during our session as if it were a natural reflex when he witnessed the game action and my ineptitude.

Within the tutorial instructional screens were displays that provided explanations of the mechanics of the game. With each screen, Trey advised, "Just click continue," while sometimes providing hurried, abbreviated explanations of the descriptions and instructions he wanted me to skip. At one point I asked him, "Shouldn't I be reading these directions and descriptions about these things I can choose for my champion?" He answered flatly, "You can if you want to."

After the first tutorial I was given a choice to go through a second, more complex tutorial on the game. Trey quickly decided for me that I did not want to go through the second tutorial.

He advised instead, “I just learned by playing. We should play a game and I’ll tell you what to do.” I did not share his confidence in my abilities and told him so. He agreed to guide me through the second tutorial but this only lasted for a few minutes. His friend Harry, a fellow gamer, came into the lab and Trey insisted that the three of us play a real game against “bots,” which are computer controlled game champions. I asked him if “bots” was short for “robots.” He thought for a moment and then said, “Yes.” It seemed as if he had not made any connection between the two words before being asked.

“I’ll show you how to set up a 5 on 5 game,” Trey offered. As a compromise, I suggested a 3-on-3 game since I had never played and I would only have to track 3 enemy opponents as opposed to 5. He agreed and directed me in setting up the game. When we came to a screen where I was supposed to choose spells and runes for my champion, Trey quickly marched me through, saying, “You can skip that.” In subsequent tutoring sessions with other gamers, I was told choosing “spells” was an important step in playing the game. The “spells” provided special abilities to a champion, and the “runes” enhanced those abilities. I chose to play with the same game champion I controlled in the tutorial sessions, Ashe. When the game began I attempted to follow Trey’s game champion on the screen but I had trouble remembering when to click the left side of the mouse and when to click the right side. Sometimes Trey took over my mouse, and even took control of my keyboard at one time stating, “I’ll just get you out of trouble.” Despite his efforts, my character died countless times and we lost. “Ashe is squishy,” Trey stated. “That means she gets killed easy. She can’t take many hits.”

During the last 15 minutes of our session I asked Trey questions about his gaming history. He “multitasked” by engaging with the game as I posed questions. Trey enjoyed reading

and used that skill in the digital game to access descriptions of champions and items available to the champions. I found this ironic given his insistence that I “press continue” rather than read the instructions provided in the tutorials. Reading, in combination with experience, enabled Trey to learn the nuances of this complex game. He said,

When I first started playing this I would read everything cause I didn't know anything. I would have to read everything that it said. But in another game, I didn't have to read. I already knew what to do.

For our second tutoring and interview session five weeks later, Trey arrived with Luc at 1:00 p.m., per our agreement. Luc explained that everyone was down by the river cleaning up and pulling weeds as a community Earth Day activity. Trey was dressed in blue jean shorts, a long sleeve t-shirt, and athletic shoes. He seemed to have grown taller in the two months since I had first met him. He answered my questions with a pleasant grin but was distracted by the computer as we spoke. He logged on and went directly to the *League of Legends* game. At times he clicked on his computer mouse but eventually settled down to give me his full attention as he answered the questions I posed.

Later he listed his best friends as Ruben and Harry. He liked them because, “they're cool and cool to hang out with.” Trey defined cool as, “like playing – playing this game together.” A guy is not cool “if you get mad for no reason sometimes.” I reminded Trey about a time when he, Ruben, and Harry wanted to play together on the same team against the older, more experienced players. I asked, “Weren't you afraid that the teams would not be even and you would lose?” He described the behavior of someone who was not “cool.” He said,

When somebody gets on my team I don't want to play with cause I really don't like him that much. And if you do one little thing wrong they'll get mad at you. That's why we don't want to play with them.

When we turned our attention to the computer screen, there was a marked difference in Trey's communication style with me. He became much more animated. "Lookit, this is our team name! You can get a team name when you're at a level 30." He pointed to the screen and showed me the team name he, Ruben, and Harry had created. After opening his game profile page Trey explained, "These are all the people I know how to control." There were images of 29 game champions, although he admitted, "I don't know how to play them all well. But I know how to control them in the game, cause I played with them before." He clicked on some of the descriptions of his champions and read them aloud. After reading the word "melee" I asked what it meant but he could only provide a definition based on what he had observed the champion do in the game. He said, "Melee is like something that you use to attack people. He uses all his claws and all that." While reading a description of a time warp weapon Trey had trouble with the word "confrontations" that was in the first part of the description. He knew enough of the words in the remaining half of the description to discern the function of the time warp. After reading the entire description, he immediately launched into a detailed explanation of the time warp. He combined contextual clues from the written passage that he could understand, what he had observed, and had experienced in previous games. He said,

Oh, so it gives you cool downs so you can come back faster. It helps him or his other teammates go faster. If you click on an enemy it makes them go slower. See how it makes him go faster?

Trey purchased two “skins” for one of his game champions. Skins were costumes for game characters. He said, “They just make him look real cool.” He used the \$10 tutoring gift from the first tutoring and interview session to buy the two skins. He explained, “I went to the mall with my mother and bought a \$10 prepaid card. You get this code and you just type it in and you get a whole lot of points added to your account.”

Champions who could do attack damage as well as take a lot of damage from opponents, were called tanks, and these were Trey’s preference. His least favorite champions were those who were unable to do much damage, or were “too squishy.” In explaining the difference between the “Classic” and “Dominion” version of the *League of Legends* game, he said, “In the classic game it’s all about getting the kills. In Dominion, it’s more about destroying the other side’s towers.”

If Trey had difficulties explaining the details of the game, he clicked on the item in question and read to supplement his explanations. He discovered that one of the champions that he liked to play with was considered both an attack damage champion, and an ability power champion. With this discovery, I asked Trey which one of the champion’s hot keys would control the ability power weapon. He responded, “Well I think it would be his “q” cause this one isn’t really boosting his attack.” Trey took time to think and make connections before he offered an opinion. Luc’s characterization of him as being the best of the new gamers may have been due to this quality.

5.1.2 Ruben.

“Rashawn you suck! Can you read that [message in game chat box]?! You’ll beat me in real life cause you’re bigger. But not in this game!” During one of my last observations of the gaming class I recorded Ruben saying this to Devon’s 15 year old brother who only occasionally attended the gaming class. Ruben’s comment is illustrative of one of his approaches to self-empowerment which was the use of competition. Much of that competition was through physicality in the form of sports or fighting. The digital game gave Ruben still another channel.

I first met Ruben when I visited the digital gaming class to assess if it might be an appropriate site for my research study. Luc, who supervised the gaming class, had already announced to the participants that I had conducted a previous study and was interested in possibly doing a more extensive study of the class and the participants. Ruben eagerly invited me to sit down and watch him play. The week before starting to tutor me he announced, “When I teach you, you’ll learn to play good!” He had rushed home from the community center and returned with his signed permission slip that very day, after having witnessed two other boys tutoring me in how to play the digital game, *League of Legends*.

At the time of our first interview and tutoring session, Ruben was 11 years old and attended a local elementary school. He described a time when he lived with his grandmother in a house not far from the community center and enjoyed “planting stuff, like radishes and stuff” with her. He added, “She’s not here right now. I think she’s in – Fresno.” He currently was living with his aunt and cousins. During one of my interviews with him, Luc added more details about

Ruben's history and living arrangements. Ruben had to repeat third grade and had the most unstable home life of the gamers. He had three siblings and their living situation had been challenging in the last few years, but had stabilized somewhat for the time being. Toward the end of my data collection in the field, Ruben's living situation again became challenging. He was placed in a foster care home outside of the Ridgeway neighborhood and no longer attended the community center. Luc and one of Ruben's teachers, Mr. Smith, were key adult figures in his life. Luc said of Mr. Smith, "He has taken Ruben under his wing since he sees a lot of ability in Ruben and would hate to see it go to waste."

In the gaming class Ruben was generally animated, confident, anxious, and friendly, often making eye contact and quick to grin at what he had to say. During our private sessions, he reacted to questions that were confusing, or uncomfortable, by looking at the computer screen or up in the air at nothing and the volume of his voice dropped. He was always dressed "neat and clean" as my family always described the acceptable form of physical presentation. For our first tutoring session, Ruben wore a black cotton t-shirt with bright space ships printed on the front, blue warm-up pants, and athletic shoes. His black hair was combed neatly so that the top waved up with body as if he had added a bit of hair mousse to make it look just so. His four foot build was solid with a slight huskiness that gave him a kind of tough looking demeanor whenever he was angry. He arrived to our tutoring session on time and with a composed "teacher persona," then instructed me in how to log into the game by telling me, "Lookit," and demonstrated by clicking on his own computer screen that sat next to mine.

When my screen opened, Ruben began by pointing out I was automatically given 400 RPs, or "Riot Points." He explained that I could put real money into this RP account to buy

“skins” for my game champions. Skins were costumes that would make the champion I played with in the game look different from the standard costume that came with the standard champion. My reaction was somewhat incredulous. I exclaimed, “Real money? I thought this game was free!” Then I asked, “Why would I want to do that?” This was the first time I witnessed his reaction when I posed a question that made him feel a bit uncomfortable. He looked at his screen and answered, “Just to -- to show off how good you are.” He explained once he had put \$10 into his account and got over a thousand RP points so that he could buy the rights to play with the champion he liked best. He bought a “skin” for that champion to make him look “cool.” I later wondered about this notion of a boy with limited means using “real money” to buy garments for a computer avatar character. I knew that a local church sometimes made large donations of clothing from which some of the gaming participants availed themselves. One evening some gamers returned to the gaming class surreptitiously carrying rolled up outfits under their arms, or discreetly put a bag of clothing under the computer table. I wanted to say or do something to allay their discomfort, like admire what they chose or point out the value of recycling. However, I thought it best not to bring further attention to what some seemed to feel a need to obscure.

After a few tries at logging into the game and Ruben offering suggestions, I again went through the tutorial as I had the Saturday before with Trey. Ruben provided the specifics of what he thought I should do in controlling my game character (champion). He confidently answered my questions about the game champions that appeared on the screen, and he spoke competently about the attributes of each -- at least to my untrained ears. He corrected my pronunciation of one of the characters, Ryze. I asked about his own choice of characters and he opened his game “profile,” and showed me 20 head shots of different game champions that he knew how to control. He pointed out his favorite and least favorite, giving reasons for his choices. He

explained, “When I first learned how to play, I liked this guy cause he was easy to play with. But this one is a lot better.” These comments were made while pointing to the images with the arrow of his computer mouse.

Ruben showed a lot of patience in explaining the “spells” that provide special abilities to a champion, and the “runes” that enhanced a champion’s abilities. Only certain spells and runes were available to me as a Level 1 player. After explaining the pros and cons of each, he introduced me to a menu of items to “buy” for my character that I had not been shown to me during an earlier tutoring session. I was impressed by how many details he remembered about the abilities of game champions, and the characteristics of the weapons, runes, and spells the game offered. He also showed me techniques for using the keyboard more effectively. Recalling when he first began playing three months before, he used the arrow keys to view different areas of the map in the game. With more experience, he had abandoned that practice and used the mouse.

Pointing directly to the screen with his index finger, Ruben instructed me in the game play. When I asked him if he ever experienced the same problems that I was experiencing he told me, “No, cause I’m used to this game... But I used to do the same thing; getting mixed up with what side of the mouse to click.” As a younger and newer player, he was not as advanced as the older more experienced participants. However, he was not hampered by age and inexperience. At one point I asked him to explain an item listed in the “store” where I could “buy” supplies and weapons for my champion. He only pointed to the screen in answer to my question, I suspect due to limited knowledge. When I asked him about an item he knew a lot about, he gave a detailed explanation.

After coaching me through two different tutorials, Ruben encouraged me to play a game with real people we would invite through the virtual world of the Internet. He assured me that everything would be alright since I could stay behind his champion, and I could depend on his support in the game. He talked me through the process of creating a game and inviting virtual players, including him. Sitting at the computer next to me, Ruben advised, “Stay behind ME.” I did, and although my champion was killed several times, we managed to win against the team of three virtual players. When Luc entered the computer lab Ruben popped up from his chair and excitedly announced, “We won the game!” He went on to provide Luc with details about my performance, at one point noting, “She got one kill, too. She didn’t do that bad.”

Despite our win, I lamented at how badly I played the game. Ruben attempted to reassure me by telling me, “Yeah, it takes a lot of reflexes.” I responded by complimenting him on his reflex actions and suggested that he must play a lot of sports. He began to list them, “Basketball, football, soccer, baseball, and dodge ball. My best game – we won 53 to 3 in basketball.” I asked him, “But 53 to 3 wasn’t very much competition, was it?” He agreed that it wasn’t but still relished the memory of the victory. Then I asked him, “With so much to remember to play this digital game, what made you want to keep playing? Why didn’t you give up?” With a matter-of-fact confidence he answered, “Cause I knew I’d get better.”

For the last 15 minutes of our session, I asked Ruben questions about his experiences in and out of school. He wheeled around in the office chair most of the time; sometimes rocking back and forth; sometimes waving his legs about. He did not remain still throughout the questioning period.

At age 4 or 5 Ruben began playing video games on a Nintendo console. He played by himself and no one taught him. He explained, “Like everything I learn, the techniques and all that, I just learn by myself. I just watch and then I do it.” He was proud of his independence in learning by what he perceived as his own devices. He said he still liked to play digital games by himself and sometimes with the team. He had no favorite format.

Ruben hesitated a moment when I asked what kinds of grades he got in school. Then he said, “4s and some 3s. Well, 4s, 3s, and 2s.” I asked him what the numbers meant and Luc clarified, “2s are Cs, 3s are Bs and 4s are As.” Ruben usually got 4s in his favorite subject. “I love math,” he said. To this I responded, “Wow! You might grow up to be a game designer. A lot of math goes into designing games, you know.” “Yeah, yeah, yeah,” he shook his head as he acknowledged his awareness. During a later interview Ruben said, “I want to be a game designer. I’ll probably go to college and learn about it so I can actually be one.” He said he got the 2’s in science since, “I don’t like science.” As he made this statement he took control of my computer mouse, clicked on my computer screen, and said, “I just added you as a friend. Alright?”

When I asked Ruben who his favorite teacher was he hesitated momentarily before explaining that,

Well, I’m not in regular classes at school. I’m kinda in special ed. But yeah, I’m moving out of that cause I don’t get in trouble anymore and stuff like that. I like Mr. Smith. He’s my special-ed teacher. I used to get in trouble *a lot*... for like fighting. I almost got expelled, actually. There was this kid who kept on bugging

me and I broke his nose. And, he was so bad he had to go to the hospital and I almost got expelled. But that was a long time ago.

After observing Ruben in the gaming classes and spending time with him as my tutor in learning the digital game, I was surprised that he was in special education classes at school. He was intelligent and capable of remembering and communicating complex details. I reasoned he was in a slower track because of fighting and getting into trouble. There is a large body of research and scholarship demonstrating that young males of color, particularly Latino and African Americans, are disproportionately assigned to special education. Recalling the last time he got in trouble at school, Ruben said, “That was about two years. It was when I was in the fourth grade. No, it was about six months or maybe two months when I was in the fourth grade.” It occurred to me that Ruben was now in the fifth grade and the math did not add up to 2 years. I chose not to pursue the issue since he seemed to want to distance himself from being one who gets in trouble – *a lot*.

Three weeks later at my second tutoring and interview session with him Ruben said if he could choose any game to play it would be *League of Legends*. He explained, “I like strategy games and more like fighting, building up your own weapons and stuff.” Furthermore, he thought digital games should be designed

exactly like *League of Legends*, where people kill, pick their own items, the maps, and the champions. Cause some maps give you health. When you’re low health you just have to go in a place, and like Halloween you just step in this place and you go and then there is this ghost. ... There’s fog and the treasure thing opens and a ghost flies on top of your head. It’s fun.

Ruben did not like to ask the other players for suggestions on how to play the game. He was proud of his ability to learn through his own initiatives, even if it meant ignoring directives from his teammates about where he should go on the game map (battlefield). He stated,

Well, sometimes I mind my own – I'm in my own world, playing my game. But with my friends sometimes they tell me to go bottom [of the game map] and I just want to go top to see how it is and then I go bottom, then I go middle – just to see the levels and stuff. If they [opposing team] want to gank [gang up] middle, I put wards [these provide the ability to see invisible enemies] so I can see them in the grass and then I go to top and put another ward there so they won't come and gank me when I'm minding my own business in the grass.

Here, Ruben declared a learning preference that was successful in the game play. Group pressure was not always successful in dissuading him from this preference. Sometimes he was criticized by his teammates for roaming around the game map, what they called “trolling,” instead of moving where he was told so that the team could execute their collective strategy. On two occasions his teammates insisted that he be switched to the other team since, “He doesn't listen.” This preference for exploratory learning was further supported when Ruben described his plan for teaching a digital gaming class. He said,

I'd probably get all the people who were starting and teach them how to play.

Sometimes I'd tell the other guys to play with them so they can go up to higher levels and stuff. I'd tell them to stay back [away from intense battles] and stuff.

Other important aspects in Ruben's hypothetical gaming class were "for players to have fun and learn strategies. To not get mad at each other. Don't get frustrated, mad. Just let it flow." I asked him to talk more about the interactions between the older and younger gamers since the younger players preferred to play on the same team, even if it meant that the teams were uneven in ability and his team would likely lose. His response indicated a preference for freedom even if it meant being called a "noob." The term was a criticism of gamers who played as if they were brand new to the game, whether they were or not. Ruben stated,

Yeah, we don't want to play with the older guys cause they be like, 'Oh, you did this,' and 'Oh, you did that.' And it's just chaos. But we were close [to winning]. Sometimes I don't like [being called a noob]. Sometimes I don't mind...but sometimes they get me really mad. It's just funny when they get mad.

This preference for freedom from the pressures of being told what to do in an authoritarian manner was reiterated in an interview with Luc, who made a distinction between "getting yelled at and getting made fun of." He said, "[The younger players] would rather be made fun of than being bossed around."

Ruben also surmised that being told what to do may interfere with his learning and success with the game. He said,

Sometimes I start off bad and late game I get good. And, sometimes I start good and late game I start doing bad. Stuff like that. I play one champion a day. Then I was doing really good and somebody tells me to be him again. I start being bad

for some reason. After I play ‘em twice for a week I do bad. But if I play ‘em once, one hero every week, I do good.

I asked Ruben if being called a noob “threw off his game” as was one of the functions of taunting. He quickly shook his head, “No.” In his taunting Ruben was willing to exchange laughter for frustration and sometimes anger. During one of the later gaming sessions the newer players were on mixed teams with the older players and looked fairly even in ability. Ruben was very confident and started “talking stuff” to the older players. Recalling this event, he laughed and said,

Yeah, yeah! Was it Biggie [an 19 year old gamer]? Yeah, cause I was Jax [a game champion] and I was super overpower. Nobody could literally stop me. Nobody. So I was just like, ‘You’re a noob.’ And Biggie and those older guys, I was just calling them noobs because I was killing ‘em [he laughs about his one-on-one battle with Biggie]. Yeah, and then I beat ‘em. Yeah it was Biggie. Biggie. And I beat him one-on-one, yeah.

Over time Ruben became even more confident in his game playing. With that confidence came more bravado and taunting toward the older players. During my second tutoring session with Ruben I again asked him about his preference for playing the game at home or in the class. This time, his answer was different. He said, “This class because there’s a lot more people and sometimes it’s just funny when they get mad; when they call them noob.” For Ruben, the taunting talk was part of the entertainment and fun, and he was willing to be the recipient of the taunting if it positioned him to enjoy taunting others.

While the location of the class was temporarily changed to the Microsoft store, I wanted to get a sense of Ruben's perceptions of the different environment. I asked if the gaming class was different or the same at the store compared to the community center. He responded,

I don't know. It's just different, probably because it's farther away and also because you actually get to be on the computers and you learn stuff. But, I don't know. It's kind of better at the store. It's just kind of better. The computers are better and it's farther away.

In response to a question about what he would think or do if he found out that the best players in his group read guides to improve their gaming skills, Ruben's comments were congruent with his view of learning by one's own initiative. He said, "For me, I think it's kind of cheating. For my things I just learn 'em. I really don't read 'em. I just stay back and do my moves." He believed players should learn by doing rather than reading about the process. This may explain why as my tutor, he insisted that I play a game, follow him on the map, and watch what he did in the game. Yet Ruben admitted that sometimes he asked the instructors for advice on how to play but he denied that he asked other gamers for suggestions. This was not in agreement with the perceptions of the older players. Wizard said *he* had taught Ruben how to play the game. But Ruben credited Luc for teaching him how to play. In subsequent observations I noticed that Ruben rarely asked other players questions in a way that might position himself as a subordinate player. During the gaming class his questions were mostly directed to Luc, or the software store instructor. However, Ruben freely offered advice about how to play the game to other players, especially the younger and newer ones. He did not limit his perceived expertise to the "noobs."

Ruben listed his best friends as Trey and Harry, two of his fellow gamers. He had a few friends from school, like Mike who also attended the community center but only played Xbox games. During one of the gaming classes, Ruben and Trey were members of opposing teams. They had never played against each other and they looked at each other longingly. I asked Ruben about being on a different team than Trey. He confirmed that they had never been on different teams before but turned immediately to explaining the competitive game details:

But I was Jax [a game champion] and he was Jax on the other side. And I kept on beating ‘em. I’m a way better character [with Jax]. I beat ‘em with this much health [raises his hand to show me his thumb and forefinger are an eighth of an inch apart]. Cause I did my dodge [agility move in the game] and did my stun [(a weapon that slows the opponent down] and I just beat ‘em like that.

Despite being friends with Trey, Ruben quickly adapted to him as an opponent game player. However, the friendship appeared to continue to be well intact.

5.1.3 Harry.

Lookit, it slows them when he shoots this one. ... And, lookit, when he has low health, he can just do his ulti [ultimate weapon] and then he won’t die. It’s only for five seconds through. But that gives him a chance to run away.

Throughout much of our second tutoring session, Harry repeatedly told me, “Lookit,” “I’ll show you,” or “watch.” The visual representations within the game provided support for him to verbalize ideas.

Harry was the third member of a friendship trio along with Trey and Ruben. I met with him after my tutoring session with Trey that first Saturday morning when the pancake breakfast was taking place. After paying my \$2, I got in line with my paper plate. "One sausage or two?" Harry asked me with a deadpan, bored expression. During the first few weeks of observations, Harry rarely showed emotion or said much in or out of the gaming class. His affect was deceptively apathetic and lethargic. As the weeks wore on, Harry expressed himself more freely and more often about the drama taking place within the game that sometimes spilled over into real life.

At 11 years old, Harry was in 6th grade and attended the same middle school as Trey. He was a regular participant in Luc's after school homework sessions and maintained an above average GPA. He self-identified as Native American. His dress was usually the same -- a large, dark t-shirt that helped to cover the extra weight he carried, blue jeans, and athletic shoes. With his monotone speaking style, he took me through each of the tutorials and gave me time to read the instructional text that I had not read during my earlier session with Trey that day. I asked about icons and symbols in the game and Harry thought carefully before providing his monotone explanations. Once when I was taking too long to figure things out, he took control of my computer mouse.

After going through both tutorials, I asked Harry if I could play a game while he sat out and coached me through the game. He agreed with a bored nod. When setting up a game, players have a limited amount of time to choose their characters and the runes and spells for those characters. My time was running out so I suggested I skip this action as Trey had advised

me to do before. “Okay, but read through your spells next time so you know how to set them,” he advised.

As I played a 3 on 3 game against bots, Harry sat next to me with shoulders slouched and arms folded in his lap. Although seemingly bored, he provided details as needed and that helped to clarify the object of the game, and other details I had missed before. As a tutor, Harry’s pace was slower and more deliberate so that I felt less stress and panicky within the game. What I was seeing when I observed him in the gaming class was quiet deliberation and execution.

The second time I met with Harry I began with a short interview before moving into the game playing. He again spoke softly and seemed disinterested in my questions. Preferring to look at the computer screen with the game homepage on it, he rarely made eye contact with me. I decided to take a different approach and have him talk to me through aspects of the game as it related to him. I asked, “How many game characters do you know how to play with.” He opened his profile page with all of the champions he had played with before. My questions were answered with one or two-word responses so I probed in an effort to elaborate. Doubtful the recorder would pick up his soft spoken voice, I paraphrased each of Harry’s responses. An excerpt of our conversation illustrates the extent of his initial communication with me.

Researcher: “Who’s your favorite champion to play with?”

Harry: “This one,” he pointed.

Researcher: “Why do you like that one?”

Harry: “Cause he’s easy.”

Researcher: “What makes Trendamere easy?”

Harry: “Because he is a lot of attack damage.”

Researcher: “What else is Trendamere good with? (There was a long pause as he thought.)

Harry: “Attack speed.”

Researcher: “What is he NOT good with?”

Harry: “Health.”

Researcher: “So he loses his health quickly?”

Harry: “Umhum.”

Researcher: “Anything else he’s not good with?”

Harry: “Ability power.”

Then, I asked Harry if he had a “skin” for his favorite champion, to which he responded with sudden animation. “Umhum!” He pointed it out on the screen, “Right there.” Through a series of questions Harry explained that he bought his skin “a long time ago” because he thought it was “cool looking.” He surmised that people bought skins to “show off.” He did not know how much the skin actually cost. He had given Luc ten dollars to buy the skin for him with his credit card. During one of my interviews, Luc shared that Harry and his brother Julius were sometimes teased by the other gamers because of their limited means which was manifested in their clothing and inability to attend field trips. I again wondered about this “free” online game, and young

people spending money to dress avatar characters. Buying skins with “real money” by gamers of limited financial means suggested that skins had high value to some of them.

According to Harry he never played the role of support within the game because he did not know how. While viewing his profile, he checked the categories of all of the champions he played with and explained them to me. During the process he was surprised to learn that Teemo was categorized as a support champion. Harry had played with this support champion without realizing he was playing the role of “support” for his teammates. I responded to his revelation with the question, “Oh, you can click on the champions and get that information on them?” The question prompted Harry to communicate more openly. He clicked on his screen and pointed out how I could learn what each champion could do in a game. By clicking on specific boxes, demonstrations of champions’ abilities could be viewed in short video animations. Harry began to ask me questions regarding what I knew and what I did not know about the game. He asked, “Do you know what jungling is?” He showed me what characters he used for jungling and who could turn invisible. “And lookit. You can set this down and it will do this,” he demonstrated on the screen. He provided details of what each of his twelve characters could do with their five abilities as he clicked on each to demonstrate. He became more comfortable in his responses and communication with me when he could reference a visual on the screen as he spoke.

I asked Harry to show me a champion I was confused about, Annie and her bear. “It just follows you around,” he explained as he clicked on video animations of Annie. He read the words “disintegrate,” “incinerate,” and “molten shield” but except for “shield,” he did not know their meanings. His voice lowed in volume when I asked him if he knew what “molten” means and admitted he did not. He did know that Annie threw fire balls for her incinerate ability. He

again limited his communication responses, and I attempted to expand his talking by asking him about Annie's "ulti" ability.

Harry: It's the bear, Tibbers, who will explode on his target. You know what blinding does?

Researcher: What does it do?

Harry: When they attack you they miss. When they got that black stuff on them. They can't see you and they miss.

(He paused as he showed the demonstration video.)

Harry: He's a scout. So he's supposed to go like that.

Harry pointed out that one champion shot toxic arrows. He could tell me that "toxic" meant poison. He then explained that the "ulti" for Teemo was the noxious mushrooms the champion threw around. I asked what the mushrooms did and he said, "It slows them down." But Harry did not know what the actual word "noxious" meant. I also asked about Teemo's "camouflage" ability and Harry explained, "He turns invisible if you just do this [stands still]." Harry interpreted the word "camouflage" as the action or effect in the game. If the champion was invisible to other players, then the meaning of the word "camouflage" was "invisible." Harry also did not know the meaning of the word "rune." However, he could explain its functional meaning within the game. He showed me the icon that represented runes on the screen and said, "These are runes. All mine do critical damage." Harry had 19 runes. He went through an extensive demonstration and explanation of his runes, how many he had, how many more he needed, and so on. Yet, he could not define the word out of its contextual function.

I was beginning to see a pattern of this among the gamers. They could determine the functions of items without understanding the meanings of the terms of those items outside of the game context. For example, none of the gamers knew the meaning of “melee” in its noun form. The Enacarta online dictionary defined the noun as “a noisy confused fight.” Champions categorized as “melee” lead gamers to interpret the word as a verb based on what the character *did*. Harry defined it as, “they get in close to fight.”

When Harry read descriptions aloud about the abilities of a character he had some difficulty with fluency. Much of his effort was expended decoding the words. After reading, he was able to articulate what one of the abilities was. However, he struggled with explaining the meanings of the other three abilities he had read about. When he explained them, his confidence waned. One of the three abilities he did not know at all and his words trialed off to nothing as he read. After he finished reading I asked him what that meant and he admitted, “I don’t know.”

Something Harry was eager to show me was that he was at a level 28 in his ranking of game experience. He did not know what level his older brother, Julius, had accomplished. He looked up Julius’ profile that showed he was at level 22. Harry announced, “I’m higher than him. But when he plays with this one champion, he can beat me.”

Although his family had Internet at home, Harry preferred to play the game at the community center, because he liked to “play with the other people and playing games [alone] gets boring.” He confirmed that part of this preference stemmed from being able to talk to the people he was playing with. However, Harry identified procedural talk as the kind of talk he found valuable. He said, “Like do that, or do this. That kind of stuff. Before games you can ask them if they want to get in the game. You invite them. They accept it. You start.”

“What does it mean when someone says they are going to beast on them?” I asked. Harry was quick to respond, “You’re going to beat them. ... I never say that to anyone.” When people say they will beast on him, Harry said, “It doesn’t make me mad. I’m gon say, ‘yeah right,’ or something like that.” He admitted that sometimes he said things like, “I’m gonna beat you,” has called Ruben’s younger brother a noob, and he calls people noob who label him with the term. “Why do the younger guys like to play on the same team?” I asked. Harry’s response was similar to that of the other younger players. He said, “Because the older ones like to boss us around; yell at us.” He preferred to be on an uneven team than be on the team with the older gamers.

Harry could not recall a time when he had the most fun playing *League of Legends*. I asked him the difference between playing at the center and playing at the software store. He responded, “The computers are different. The mouse, the chairs, they’re all different.” He also liked playing other games at the store, especially the Xbox games.

Harry was not sure about his plans for the future. When I asked about his interests he shrugged his shoulders and said, “I don’t know.” His favorite subject was reading and he enjoyed “chapter books.” “What’s your favorite book?” I asked. He answered, “I don’t know.” I then asked, “What about college? Do you think you’ll go?” He responded, “Maybe.”

5.1.4 Julius.

If Master Yi had his ulti [ultimate weapon] he would burn Teemo [game champion]. Just let them poison themselves slow and painfully. I’m trying to get him to come to me. Come here little chickadee. ... He’s MIA [missing in action]. Run! Run! Run like the wind! Watch out! They’re

going to go after you. ... I take that as a compliment. You got a problem with that? How do you like that Harry?!

While playing *League of Legends* Julius had a habit of incessant commentary and chatter, sometimes in the form of making nonsensical sounds or engaging in onomatopoeia. On days when he was particularly animated, he physically moved around, sometimes pretending to look at other gamers' screens or getting in his younger brother's face and making flagellation sounds. Another example of his chatter was, "Just run away. Go, go, go! Get away from me! Get away from me! I just killed him right now. Beast, beast, beast!" [Breathes hard like he has been running fast.] As Julius played in the action of the game he often provided his own brand of this ongoing commentary. Sometimes his fellow gamers found it amusing, and sometimes he was told to "Shut up."

Julius was scheduled to tutor me at 1:00 but when I arrived for my earlier 11:00 appointment with Wizard, he was already at the community center playing a war-themed board game with a boy two to three years younger than him. After winning the game, he went to the entrance of the gym and watched the girls' basketball game with Ruben. They both made comments about what the girls were doing wrong. "She's a ball hog," said Julius. Ruben offered, "She can't shoot. We're losing, 22 to 4." The girls' team seemed to be viewed as part of their larger collective community.

As we watched the game, Julius began to query me about what I already knew about the *League of Legends* game. He asked, "Do you know how to use the q,w,e,r keys? Do you know how to buy stuff?" He took on a teacher persona and authority, and acted confident in his knowledge and skills. It did not seem that Wizard would be on time so I agreed to have Julius

tutor me first. He seemed disappointed when Wizard arrived at the last minute. I asked Julius if he would mind waiting until 1:00 as we had originally planned. He did not look at me when he said, “yes.”

A few days before I had an appointment with Julius but he had been put out of the community center for physically hurting another boy and we had to reschedule. As we began our tutoring session I told him how glad I was that he was able to meet with me after it had not worked out the first time. I used the opportunity to ask him how the community center discipline was different or the same as discipline in school. Julius became a bit sullen and began his response with an accusatory tone but his tone changed as he spoke. He said,

That was bullshit. ... If you get in trouble here it's like getting suspended at my school. For a day or two days or whatever. And ah -- you get in trouble easier here than at my school. Well no -- it takes a long time. It's takes longer to get in trouble here than it takes at my school, I mean. Because they aren't as strict here as they are at my school. Here, they just say stop doing that three times and then they just say, “Go! See you tomorrow.”

“How often do you get in trouble at school?” I asked. He responded, “Sometimes. ... But I've never been suspended. I came close when I gave this kid a big bruise in his gut.” Devon and Wizard were in the lab playing *League of Legends* and they both chuckled a little when Julius continued to tell me more about how he had “punched a kid in his gut a couple of weeks ago.” A community center staff member later contradicted Julius' claim by reporting that he had been suspended from school “countless times.”

At the time of our first session Julius was nearly 6 foot tall, 14 years old, and in the 8th grade. He attended one of the city's public middle schools. His favorite subject was P.E., and his favorite sport was boxing. He had only taken lessons briefly when he was eleven but wanted to return to the sport. He also had an interest in lacrosse but had only been playing for three weeks. Most of his life he had lived in the Ridgeway community, and had been regularly attending the community center since he "was a little kid." He had only visited one other city community center when he was required to go to summer school at that location one year. Julius said, "I probably won't go back there since I don't think I'll be going back to summer school." He received mostly Cs and Ds in school, and his least favorite subject was math so he didn't do well in it.

Julius began playing video games with his cousins when he was about 6 or 7. He recalled, "I had some games, they had some games. Then they moved to Montana." He did not know the name of the first video game he learned how to play but remembered, "You had to go across the desert and save the world or something. It was weird." The first game he played that he enjoyed was called, *Modern Warfare*. It was a game he sometimes played with another player, sometimes by himself. He liked to play with his friends and cousins more than playing alone because, "It's boring, just playing on story mode. ... Players just don't stand there and let you shoot at them without shooting back."

Although Julius had a younger sister and brother, he lived alone with his grandfather. His siblings lived nearby with his stepmother. During this session I learned that Harry was Julius' younger brother. "Oh, I didn't know that," I exclaimed. "Yeah a lot of people don't,"

Julius answered. He identified his cultural and ethnic background as “Native.” His tribal group was “Blackfeet.”

As I questioned Julius he fidgeted in his chair and rubbed his face as if he was getting tired. Devon was at a computer next to Julius and interjected by asking him a question about the game. As if I were not there, Julius pointed to Devon’s screen and became engrossed in communication with him. I waited a moment and then interrupted by repeating a question to Julius.

Since I also found the champion, Ashe, to be too “squishy,” I asked Julius to take me through a tutorial with a different game champion. He laughed at my use of the word “squishy” and explained, “she can do damage but she can’t take hits.” With this shift to talking more about the details of the game, Julius’ demeanor changed. He stopped fidgeting and made eye contact when he spoke to me. He offered additional information and elaborated on attributes of the game. Ryze was one of three champions from which I could choose to play in the tutorial. “Have you ever played with Ryze?” I asked. “Ahhh, yes, when I was a beginner,” he said. Among the older boys who had been playing for two or more years, Julius was still considered a beginner. He attempted to obscure his nascent expertise with the game – at least at first. Later in the session he justified gaps in his knowledge by claiming his beginner status. As we went over the three available champions, Julius made every effort to sound competent in his knowledge. If he did not know something he noted, “I haven’t played with her much so I can’t say much about her cons but her pros are...”

With each of my gaming tutors I expanded my knowledge of terminology in the game. With Julius I came to understand that “ulti” is the special weapon a champion has that is

controlled by the letter “R” on the keyboard. I surmised the word was short of “ultimate” weapon. Sometimes it was simply referred to as “my special.” The other boys who were present in the computer lab were listening in on our session. When I asked if Julius or the guys made up the term “noob” based on “newbie,” Trey explained that the word was used in a lot of other games as well.

“Have you bought any skins for your favorite champion?” I asked. Julius did not hesitate to declare, “They’re a waste of money.” He only bought characters with the points he won in the game because, “No one on your team can use that character if you have bought it.” This was important to Julius since he only liked to play with one particular champion. At the time of our first tutoring session, I had never seen him play with a different champion. Later, when I did see him play with a different champion, he complained much of the time and made excuses for his poor performance until Biggie looked him in the face and flatly said, “Shut up.” Over time the other gamers taunted Julius about only being able to play with a single champion. Julius began to experiment with other game champions when Luc was available to answer his barrage of questions about the champion he was trying.

I turned back to the subject of school and asked, “How is the gaming class different from your classes at school?” At first Julius’ response was, “Gaming class??” He did not view the gaming session as a “class” even though participants were required to do a short academic activity at the start of each class, and there was constant learning taking place with the acquisition of the endless details and complexities of the game. After explaining this perspective, he described the difference by saying, “This class gives you something you actually want to do and teaches you how to do it better... It teaches you strategies and how to perform.” A few

weeks before, Julius became frustrated with the game and stopped playing. “Why didn’t you give up then since it is so hard?” I asked. He responded, “The more I play the game, the easier it gets.” I then asked, “Would you play the game on your own without other guys in the class?” Julius said sometimes he played alone at home but his “Internet ain’t that reliable.”

When I wanted to know, “What function does this weapon perform?” Julius explained that, “It won’t kill them but it will hurt ‘em – hurt them.” He corrected his enunciation in the role of tutor even though I was conscious to use a casual tone. Sometimes Julius read the descriptions of the weapons off of the computer screen as if he was trying to make it look like it was information that was already in his head. To explain what AOE (area of effect) meant, he asked Devon who sat next to him. Julius had been trying to field my questions on his own but this one made him seek help from a more experienced gamer.

While I went through the tutorial, Julius mostly gave me his full attention. This changed when we set up a game and played a 3 on 3 game. He was off and running in the game while I roamed aimlessly getting killed at every turn. Afterwards, he explained this away by saying it was to help me learn through experience. Once during the game I exclaimed, “Ohhh, she’s going to get me!” Julius responded, “No she isn’t. Trust me.” Julius may have started out intending to support me in the game but he got caught up in the action along the way and left me to my own devices.

I also asked Julius about the “smack talk” I heard players use during the gaming class, and if he had talked smack with his friends and cousins when he used to play video games with them. He laughed a little and said,

Not to them but sometimes here. ... It's just like playing around [when you] say, 'I'm beating on you.' It's not really to be an insult. It's just like to say, 'Yeah, you're weak right now. You don't have enough whatever to beat me.' So that's what it means basically.

In responding to whether he disliked being the object of smack talk, Julius indicated that talking smack had something to do with reminding other gamers of their own shortcomings in the game. He said,

I just make them angry cause they say I do something totally unexpected. Well, not angry just annoyed cause I'm not doing something I'm expected to be doing. That's what you do. Cause sometimes they make mistakes when they're playing. Like try killing to you faster than they should so [then] they die.

During one gaming class Julius resisted playing with a new game champion. I reminded him of his words, "I don't want to play with him cause then I'll get beasted on." He responded, "Who? Aragon? That's cause he's an attack damage person that I'm not used to. I didn't want to choose that player cause I knew they would beast on me." I asked him what the word "beast" meant to him, and he said, "It means getting killed so much it doesn't matter anymore. You won't have a chance anymore." To be "beasted on" was to be disempowered and killed within the game. It was a commonly used taunt that had been created by the older more experienced gamers. During one of the gaming classes at the software store, some of the gamers shouted out the term repeatedly as if it were a war chant, "Beasted! Beasted! Beasted!" One of the store employees approached the group and asked, "Beasted? Is that the new word?"

5.1.5 John.

“Anytime you practice something, you’ll get better at it. Just keep practicing and one day you’ll be better than anybody else --I guess.” This was John’s response to my question regarding his motivation to continue to play the complex game, *League of Legends*. Of Guatemalan heritage, John was the newest member of the gaming class. During an interview, Luc observed, “John doesn’t communicate that well even when he plays the game in general.” Teamwork within the game required gamers to communicate with each other. Being a quiet boy, John often acquiesced and went along with the demands and requests of the other members of the group. Sometimes he was chastised by teammates who shouted out to him, “Why didn’t you call MIA?!” Gamers were expected to alert their teammates when game champions on the opposing team were “missing in action” (MIA) from the battlefield map. Champions with abilities to “go invisible” could use the element of surprise to ambush their opponents.

While the class was held at the software store, John attended fairly regularly, but when it returned to the community center, he rarely came. However, he frequently attended the community center’s after school homework help sessions that Luc supervised. At the time of our first tutoring and interview session, John was 13 years old, in the 7th grade, and he attended a public middle school. John spoke both English and Spanish and he sometimes conversed in Spanish with Ruben and Biggie in the gaming class.

The week before our first session John had not shown up for our scheduled appointment so I met with another boy instead. John later told me he had forgotten the appointment. Given John’s quiet demeanor, I suggested the aspects of the game he could help me with throughout much of the tutoring session. I asked specific questions, offering that I needed my memory

refreshed. John never admitted that he did not know the answer to a question. Some of his answers were vague regarding the same items that I asked about with previous game tutors.

As the session progressed, John smiled more and began to offer more information beyond my questioning. After taking me through the tutorials, I suggested that we play a 3 on 3 game. He began to take me through the process of setting up a game but then he took control and set us up to play against “bots” instead of real people. When I questioned him about this, he seemed embarrassed and said, “Oh, I didn’t know that’s what you wanted to do.” We abandoned the game with bots and set up a new game with virtual players.

Like some of the other gamer tutors, John was off and running once he became absorbed in the game action. As I asked him questions about what I should do or what I should buy, John gestured to Ruben by cocking his head toward me and said, “Help her.” Ruben had come in during our session and had not entered into a game yet. He graciously came to my rescue and pointed out the item I should buy for my champion.

While we were playing, a small boy entered the lab and stood close enough to John to be touching as he watched the game action over John’s shoulder. The boy was so small I wondered about his age and supervision as he seemed too young to be about on his own. He appeared to be only 4 or 5 years old, but possibly underdeveloped. During the last few minutes of our session, I asked John who he lived with at home. He pointed to the same small boy, and said he was his 10 year old brother. John also lived with his 8 year old sister, and his mother and father.

Among the gamers, John maintained the highest GPA, 3.9 or 4.0. This did not come easy for him. He said, “I have to study a lot. ... My favorite subject is science – and reading, and

writing. ...I usually read for fun.” He was not reading a book at the moment but he had one on hold at the library he would pick up soon. He added, “I like interesting books. Kinda like mysterious. ... My favorite book was this book called, *My Bloody Life*. ... It’s a about this kid who doesn’t know why his parents treat him like a slave.” I later looked this book up and found that it was about a 12 year-old boy who ran away from home and turned to drugs and gang life but he eventually turned his life around for the better.

John’s explanation for why the gaming class overwhelmingly attracted more boys more than girls was,

Boys might like computer games more. When I first tried it I thought it was pretty cool. I guess they [girls] just don’t know how to play and they think it’s too hard. It takes kinda a long time to learn the skills to do it.

I asked about the teasing talk among the gamers and what he thought it meant when guys say, “I’ll beast on you?” John responded quickly to these questions with, “Like gank you, or gang up on you. I’ll get you out of nowhere and kill you. I followed with, “How do you feel about the guys saying they beasted on you?” To this he replied, “I don’t know. I just get them back once I’m back in [the game after his champion regenerates].” Despite this comment demonstrating a desire to play well enough to reap retaliation, John denied that any of the smack talk made him want to play better. Instead, he said “I don’t let it[smack talk] bother me. I just play the way I want to play.” His definition for “noob” was, “somebody who doesn’t know how to play that much.” When I asked John how it made him feel to be called a noob he said, “I just ignore it. I don’t really care. ... It’s basically just a game. ... I call them a noob just to tease them.”

John explained how he learned to play by stating, “I learned the game from Luc. He really helped me. I didn’t really know how to play until he showed me.” The only computer in his home belonged to his dad so the game was only available to him at the community center. I asked him if he ever read game guides to learn more and he responded,

I have this friend and he’s in high school. He’s been playing a long time and he told me to just play the game. Play with bots to practice and learn how to play. So that’s how I learned, too.

John rejected the idea that he was “new” to the game and to the group. He said, “I understand what to do, I know how to play. I know how to work together on the team.” He also played football on his school team but not at the community center. He did not have a favorite television show or watch much of it. In ten years’ time, John saw himself as a robotic engineer.

5.2 Portraits of “The Beasts”

5.2.1 Wizard.

“*League of Legends* was easier than playing other sports. I’m not that good at [sports]. I’m more of a strategy guy. I play [*League of Legends*] for the strategies.” This was Wizard’s response to the question of how playing the digital game compared to playing popular sports like basketball or football. Wizard seemed to place his digital game playing experience in a category comparable to the physical sports frequently played and valued by males.

Wizard did not say anything to me when he arrived 10 minutes late for our tutoring appointment. He was always quiet, demure, and evasive outside of the digital game. When he played in the gaming class and got caught up in the action and drama, he exhibited a different

personality. “Boooy! Boooy! Boooy! I beasted on you!!!” This became a familiar mantra from Wizard. It came from something deep within him that was usually hidden from the cursory eye.

I began our meeting by asking Wizard to tell me a little about himself. He was 17 years old, in the 11th grade and had lived in the area most of his life. He had three brothers and he lived with his mom. He described his ethnic or cultural identity as, “native” but did not know what “nation” meant. “What tribal group or First Nation are you a member?” He responded, “Blackfeet” with an emphasis and higher volume. A community center staff member who had known Wizard and his family for several years and visited his home reported that Wizard was actually of Hmong heritage. When he first began attending the community center, he foiled the attempts of staff members to contact his mother by claiming that she did not speak English well. When staff finally did meet Wizard’s mother, she spoke English fluently.

During our first meeting Wizard indicated that his favorite subject in school was physical science. He had aspirations of becoming an engineer by first attending a community college and moving on to a four-year college later. “I don’t have the money to go right into a four-year school,” he said.

During our second tutoring and interview session, Wizard’s account of his academic profile brought some contradictions to the surface. This time he identified his favorite subject as, “Probably history. [I’m getting] probably a C-,” and his least favorite, “Probably science, or math. I don’t know.” He was failing Geometry, because, according to him, “I don’t really study a lot for the tests.” He was enrolled in Algebra 2, because he failed geometry the previous year. He stated, “I’ll probably have to take it again next year.” I asked about the school offering tutoring,

to which he responded, “They do. I just think I’m lazy.” He had been failing Language Arts but had recently turned in some late work that might bring his grade up to a C-.

While we talked, Wizard entertained himself by opening his own *League of Legends* game. While I fumbled around setting up the camera and did not engage him directly, he started playing the game. At that time he did not play digital games at home since he did not have computer Internet access. This changed by the time we met 7 weeks later for a second tutoring session.

Wizard introduced me to acronyms and more gaming words that were modifications of “real” words. These came forth from him as naturally as they would from a military commander. He said, “AFK is away from the keyboard. MIA is missing in action.” He liked to “farm” which meant to kill minions, aka “creeps,” to collect money, manna, and strength. He put a lot of value into strategizing to meet the challenges of the game. When his time came to strike, he went for the larger kills against the champions in the game. “You have to be patient,” he said. Wizard’s reserved demeanor changed just enough to show he enjoyed thinking about these strategic actions. He smiled and smirked a bit as he spoke of his lying-in-wait- to-kill approach. He waited for his opponents to make a mistake and then, “Just kill ‘em.” Or, he waited for his teammate to “gank ‘em,” that is, sneak up on the opponent and attack. Then Wizard joined in the action with the odds favoring him and his teammate. These strategies were consistent with what I had observed about Wizard. He often sat quietly and captivated by the computer screen with a devious, wide smile on his face.

From Wizard’s perspective, he had taught others to play the game, including Ruben. However, during our earlier tutoring session, Ruben informed me that it was Luc who had taught

him how to play the game. Wizard smiled about “his” success with Ruben but admitted that he did not always play well since, “He likes to ‘troll.’ He just moves around all over the map without really doing anything. You don’t really help your teammates [when you do that].” This explanation provided a better understanding of a scene I had witnessed in the gaming class. Wizard had insisted on trading Ruben for Julius after playing a game. Wizard went on to say, “Ruben messes around a lot. You yell at him and he just laughs about it. So I just say, ‘Forget you’... He doesn’t take the game seriously.”

Wizard seemed to take delight in using game vocabulary that he suspected I did not understand. He used the vocabulary as if it were commonplace, forcing me to ask for explanations throughout our time together. I asked him to review the game champion, Ashe. “She’s an AD, he said with a slight smile. “What’s that?” I asked. “Attack damage,” he casually replied. I probed further and he elaborated, “Ashe usually carries the team since she can shoot from far away. [But] she’s ‘squishy’ since she has low health.” Wizard claimed that he preferred Ashe as a champion over melee heroes since a player had to be smart to effectively use her.

We decided to set up a game with bots instead of real people. I asked Wizard to describe the roles and abilities of the champions the bots would be controlling on our team. He described one that played a “support” role. During one of the gaming classes, the software store instructor provided a mini lesson to the group about the support role and the champions who could be used for that role. When he asked who would like to try playing support in a game, a few of the gamers looked at each other with a scowl on their faces and no one volunteered. I asked Wizard if he ever played support. Devon was playing at a computer nearby. They looked at each other and laughed a bit. Then Wizard responded, “I’m not really good at playing support” Previously, I

asked Luc about the support role. He said, “A lot of guys don’t like to play it cause you really don’t get a chance to get any kills. You just go around helping to keep your teammates from getting killed.” The support role may have been viewed as lower status in game action, and was not valued much for individual self-affirmation, gratification, and group recognition.

Wizard’s explanations of his game strategies were more in depth than most other players, especially the younger ones. He preferred to fight in the bottom section of the game map. Because there were more bushes, it was easier to hide, and avoid being ganked. While tutoring me, Devon suggested that I take my champion back to its base regularly when health was low. But Wizard wanted me to stay and fight even if more than half of my health was gone. I told him he was dangerous and he smiled slightly. Eventually, he became so enmeshed in his own game play I had to tap him on his arm to get him to pay any attention to me and my questions.

At one point I repeated a comment Devon made during our tutoring session. I said, “You know it is true that computers are stupid because bots are doing what a thinking person wouldn’t do.” Both Devon and Wizard interrupted their game playing for a moment and laughed. They had been extremely quiet and concentrating on playing but my statement broke the concentration for them to laugh a bit. I got another laugh from the boys when I announced, “Oh, that’s you! I just tried to kill you and you’re on my team.” I began to announce everything that I was seeing in the game. Wizard hid in the bushes and jumped out and killed someone. I commented, “There you go. You hid in the bushes and got him. Good for you!” Wizard laughed and said, “Thank you!” Then I said, “Oh that guy just jumped out at you. He’s going after you! Oh, that guy just took half your doggone life away.” Wizard flatly responded, “I know.” I laughed and asked, “Don’t you like my commentary?” He made no response. My pointing out him being ganked by

another player did not seem to be taken in the same way as it was with gamers of Wizard's class. Their comments provoked banter and laughter.

While playing the game Wizard seemed to only want to focus on the game and not much of anything else. After our game, I asked him to step out of the computer lab so that I could ask him a few more questions. When we sat down he seemed to look off at other things and showed little interest in conversing. I attempted to engage him by asking about sports he played. He responded, "I only played football for school. Not basketball."

For Wizard, the gaming class was "an experience where you get to enjoy using strategies against other people. You get to kill everything." I asked him for clarification of what he meant by killing "people" in the game. I commented, "But you don't like to really kill people in real life. So why is killing people in this game so much fun?" Wizard answered, "If a guy is good, I have to really think, like how to kill him... Yeah, it's the challenge of killing him. How am I supposed to get this guy and kill him?" The fun was in out-smarting his opponent; killing his opponent was the proof that he had done so.

There were times in the game when Wizard would be attacked and did not run, even though he knew his character would be killed in that situation. He just wanted to "get that guy" and didn't care about the consequences. Wizard seemed to apply similar reasoning for leaving me to my own devices. He said, "I left you so you would learn on your own. That teaches you how to kill creeps and how to harass someone."

During our second tutoring session Wizard and I played a 3 on 3 game with virtual Internet players. I controlled the champion Ashe and was on Wizard's team. He took top, I went

bottom. He got in a battle against two opposing champions. I shot one of my long distance arrows and hit one of the champions Wizard was fighting and Wizard was able to finish him off for the kill. “That was a good shot! You helped me kill him!” he exclaimed.

5.2.2 Flash

No, it wasn't through guides [I learned the game]. I was trying to learn how to play this champion and Rick told me to just go to this website so I did. I was building this character I never played before. I didn't know what to buy and Rick was like, ‘Oh, go to this website.’

This was Flash’s explanation for his interest in reading online gaming guides. The gamer that Luc and a few other players identified as the best in the group, Rick, pointed Flash to online guides. Flash often suggested that the instructor at the software store go online and search for specific gaming guides. He valued the online guides even more than the knowledge of the software store gaming instructor. Flash showed me a Website, mobafire.com, which he consulted regularly. He said he consulted this resource “when I have questions about the game or I just feel like reading up on the game.”

Flash was enrolled in honors classes at his public school. His favorite subjects were math and chemistry, although his last math grade was only a ‘C.’ Although he indicated that he took harder classes than the regular ones, according to Luc Flash was no longer attending the after school homework sessions as he once did, and his grades were only average. Flash had no idea where he wanted to go to college but he saw himself as "hopefully an architect” in the future.

Of Mexican heritage, Flash was 16 years old and in 10th grade when we met for our first tutoring session. He was born in the U.S. but his parents were born in Mexico. They spoke both English

and Spanish at home. Flash was about 5' 8" tall, was of average build, and he wore silver braces that he flashed every time he smiled, which was often. His hair was two inches long at the top and always perfectly sculpted in a voluminous thunderbolt - spiked style. He wore colored contact lenses that gave his eyes a violet hue. At our first tutoring session, I was surprised to see that his hair was cut shorter with only about a quarter of an inch all around his head.

Flash lived with his mom, dad, and his sister, who was 18 years old. His older brother was 22 and lived in another neighborhood nearby. No one else in the household played video or digital games any more. They used to play Xbox when Flash was younger, "which was a big deal at the time." He and his family had lived in the Ridgeway neighborhood his entire life and he attended the community center since he was a small child. He recalled coming to the center, "Maybe since 5th or 6th grade. I used to come every day, but now only once or twice a week just to hang out with my friends." He regularly played dodge ball and computer games "with all the guys." He was attracted to the games and activities at the community center and had never attended any other centers in the city.

I asked Flash to talk me through his game profile so that I could better understand what everything meant on the profile page, and improve my knowledge of the mechanics of *League of Legends*. During the beginning of one of the gaming classes, the gamers studied their individual profiles and talked to each other about the statistics and accomplishments documented on their individual gaming profile pages. They made boastful remarks such as, "Look how many pages of runes I got!" and "I got this many kills and this many assists. I got more than you!" Flash explained all of this and demonstrated how to navigate the profile page. I had no runes, only slots where I could put them. He reminded me that, "You need to be at a higher level to use runes."

After opening his own profile, Flash demonstrated how he was set up in the game. At the time, I was at level 5, he was at level 30, the highest possible. Most of the players in the class were at level 30, with the exception of a couple of “noobs” who were in the upper 20s. The profile page allowed players to review details of their game history, including what purchases they made to equip their champions, how many kills achieved, how many assists, and how much damage they took and dealt. When asked if checking this was a way to improve one’s game, Flash replied, “Not really. You look at it just to see how you did.” He admitted that he used the information to brag about his past game performances, as the other gamers did.

While the gamers were intently inspecting their profile pages, Flash mentioned to another gamer sitting next to him that he had erased his runes. “Did you really do that?” I asked. He responded, “Naaa, I was just messing with him.” Flash did a lot of “messing with” the other gamers. He often teased them, especially Ruben and Biggie, who sometimes spoke Spanish with him.

I also asked Flash about the different versions of the game the class played occasionally. He informed me that it is the same game but the goals are different. He explained,

In the regular *League of Legends*, one side tries to destroy the other side’s main base. The other games are just custom games. [In] the one we played the object was to get killed by their fountain. It’s just a custom game, just for fun. It doesn’t count as anything.

If the custom games “didn’t count,” playing of the Classic version of the game *did* count -- for something. Who did the customizing of the games was a mystery. Flash guessed that it was

probably the company's game designers. He did not know how to customize games himself; or at least he wasn't sure since he had never tried it. He declared, "I wouldn't know what to do even though it doesn't take programming skills." I wondered about the possibilities. What if someone did show Flash how to design a game? What would he do with that knowledge, given his proclivity for "reading up on the game" when he felt like it.

After Flash explained the profile page, we set up a 5 on 5 game with virtual players. I followed Flash throughout the game and he patiently attended to my questions and poor gaming skills. He showed me how to get buffs [boosts to a champions attributes] for extra power. These could be acquired by killing monster-like animations that lurked in the bushes. Whenever he had to leave me to go attend to another area of the battlefield map, he told me where to stand until he returned. Although we ultimately lost the game, I did not feel abandoned to die countless times.

For our second tutoring session I met Flash in the computer lab where he was already waiting patiently. His hair was already growing back in and was combed into waved spikes. He proudly smiled his braces-grin, and then he patiently listened to more in-depth explanations of the study. In his usually style, Flash was dressed in a modest knit, striped shirt and black jeans, and wore athletic shoes.

During an interview with Luc he explained that Flash sometimes spoke Spanish in the gaming class. I asked Flash about this and he explained,

Well, maybe [speaking Spanish] to Ruben and Jorge [a gamer who no longer attended the class]. It's usually like trash talking... Sometimes strategies when it's me, Rick, and Jorge, and we're playing a team that doesn't speak Spanish, like

Wizard, Devon, and someone else who doesn't speak Spanish. We'll talk in Spanish so they won't know what we're doing.

Flash added that most times the other players did not react to them speaking Spanish, but sometimes "they will get mad." Flash acknowledged with a laugh that he noticed Luc sometimes understood the Spanish phrases about strategy moves.

With access to the Internet, Flash was spending more time playing the *League of Legends* game at home. He rarely attended the gaming class after its return to the community center because, "now everybody's got it [*League of Legends*] at home so I communicate with everybody by just typing in the chat box. Sometimes I Skype. I like Skype more; it's quicker." Gamers were able to continue their "trash talk" by typing in the chat box or using Skype. However, they did not engage with the talk to the same extent as they did in the class. At the software store Flash did little verbal boasting and taunting toward other gamers but he often grinned and laughed at hearing the "trash talk" of others.

Since Flash read game guides, I wanted to know if he took the time to read the descriptions of the items provided in the actual context of the game while playing. And if so, could he follow and understand what he was reading. He said,

I don't really read it. I just look at the items. I usually already know what the items do cause I've tried them out already before. And when I read them, the items say what they do. What I've seen them do already.

I questioned Flash about some of the particulars of the game as I did with the othes. I asked about the difference between ability power and attack damage to which he responded, Attack damage is just your amount of damage you would normally do. When you play Ashe, she does damage any time she shoots even if you are not pressing any

of the 4 keys. Ability power is the amount of damage you do when you use the 4 keys [q,w,e,r]. It's really to help your teammates kill players that you have already weakened with your abilities. If you are an ability power person you would buy things specifically for what you can do; like if you are a tank you buy more health and more armor. If you are a tank you probably won't get many kills cause your job is to take the hits for your teammates.

From his explanation it seemed the game was designed to entice gamers to work together as a team.

I also asked about some of the gamers inspecting their death recap pages [summaries of what their opponents used to slay them] before they decided on what to buy next for their champions. He accessed a death recap page and explained what the statistics meant. He frequently consulted the page during a game to ascertain what weapons his opponents had purchased so that he could buy items to better counter their effects.

5.2.3 Devon.

I didn't like it [digital gaming]. I thought it was nerdy and stuff. ... All they did was play DOTA. So after a while, I was like, I might as well learn how to play it. That's all they gon do. Luc was like, 'Come on and play; it's fun.' He said, 'It won't hurt to try.' So I tried it and I liked it.

This is how Devon recounted his entry into the digital gaming group at Ridgeway. He did not play digital games when he first started attending the community center a few years ago. He was not tempted to play until after he had established friendships with other males who played.

I walked into the front door of the community center one evening for my appointment with Julius and some of the gamers were in the lobby. Devon promptly approached me with, “Are you here for Julius? He got kicked out for fighting so he can’t tutor you tonight. Can somebody take his place? I will.” Devon was the gamer who asked, after I first introduced the study, “We get paid, right?” My plan was to have all the younger “noobs” tutor me at least once before I moved “up” to the older, more experienced gamers. But given the circumstances, I enthusiastically accepted Devon’s offer as a substitute for Julius.

At the time of our first tutoring session, Devon was 17 years old and in the 12th grade. He was the only African American who attended the gaming class on a regular basis. Occasionally, his younger brother, who was 15 years old, came too. With an athletic build, Devon was approximately 6 feet tall and participated on his high school basketball and track teams. Luc described him as impatient with some of the other gamers, noting that, “He is really smart so sometimes he’ll say stuff like, ‘Oh, you’re so stupid.’ His parents are well educated so he comes from that kind of background.”

Devon was planning to attend college immediately, and was applying to several 4-year universities. He had lived in the neighborhood for 8 years with his mother, father, brother, and 4 year old sister. He had only been visiting the community center for the last 3 years. Devon explained this by saying,

I didn’t really have friends over here. All my friends were on the Hill [in another area of the city with the largest population of African Americans]. I used to live over there. That’s where all my family is, too. Just because I lived here, that doesn’t mean I hung out with people here. I just – I lived here but I was always

somewhere else [travelling by bus]. Finally, I just came over here one day and just kept coming. Now I got two sets of friends I can go to pretty much.

Luc opened the computer lab for us and Devon was quick to start the gaming program on the computer next to the one I used for the tutoring sessions. Something was not working right on his computer so he sat at a computer a couple of chairs away from mine. I told him, “That won’t work since I need you to be next to me to direct my actions in the game.” I explained that I needed him to take me through a tutorial so that I could get a sense of his thinking about playing the game. He had never gone through the tutorials himself; instead he said, “I just started playing.” My response to this was that I wanted to take it slow so I could see how he approached the game, which might be different from others.

As I opened up the tutorial, Devon began to multitask. He started his own game and attempted to answer my questions in-between his playing. I asked him pointed questions to redirect his attention back to me; for example, “Could you explain what you know about the three champions I can choose from in this tutorial?” Devon was more articulate in describing the champions than the younger gamers. He directed me to click on champions and read the descriptions provided, a practice he used when learning about a champion who was new to him. Like the others, he used the term “melee character.” Devon first heard the word “melee” when he played the digital game, *Warcraft III (DOTA)* in the gaming class. He noticed that it applied to “people” who went in close to the fighting. He used the word in the context of the game and his understanding of that context. He was not aware that the word had meaning outside of the game.

In his description of another champion, Devon used the phrase “mage character,” one who uses magical powers against opponents. He was explicit in pointing out that words in the

game were often shortened versions of real-world words. After choosing the champion I would control, I asked which spell he would choose if he were controlling the champion. Without a pause he said, “Teleport!” So if you die you can hurry up and get back to the tower so they [opponents] won’t kill it, and you can help your teammates.” The younger gamers had suggested choosing “Heal” and “Revive” so that I could protect the health of my champion. He said, “I got Heal and Revive when I first started.” Devon was a much more aggressive and offensive player concerned about taking action to defend and assist his teammates. In pondering whether to buy “skins” for his champion, Devon placed his hand on his chest and explained, “I’m not into the game like that. Cause you got to use real money. That’s too much for me. I wouldn’t do that.” However, he had bought some skins with game points that he won, but he hadn’t acquired many.

Given the complexities of the game, I asked Devon what made him persist. He explained he could instantly play since he had played *DOTA*, a more difficult game. As he said, “This game is easier to play. In *DOTA* they don’t tell you what to buy. You have to build your own items.” In the following conversation, we talked about the process he went through as he began playing *DOTA*.

Researcher: “What made you want to continue with *DOTA* if it was so difficult and you died so much?”

Devon: Cause you know you’re going to get better. If you keep doing something over and over again you get better at it so –

Researcher: Not everything --

Devon: Most things I do, I get better at. . . . I wanted to keep doing it, yeah. And I knew they had played longer than me. So I was like, if they played that long I could get as good as them if I keep coming [to the class].

Researcher: And how long did it take before you felt like, 'I'm just as good as they are'?

Devon: A couple of months. Two or three or four. It's not hard.

Researcher: What about when they were talking all that smack to you? Didn't that make you want to give up?

Devon: Not really.

Devon described the object of the game as, "Kill the other person." Then he grasped my mouse, pointed to a part of the game on the computer screen and said, "Whoever kills that [the opponent's nexus], is the winner of the game." A "nexus," is the central base. Although he had said the object of the game was to "kill the other person," the nexus was a thing, not a game champion. It seemed as if Devon lost site of the broader "mission" of the game and took a myopic view, concentrating on the intense fighting among champions.

At times during our tutoring session, I felt as if I was talking to myself as Devon played his own game and I went through the tutorial. It was not until Luc came into the lab that Devon stopped playing his game and gave me his full attention. He pointed at the screen and confidently told me what to buy for my champion, when to shoot, and to run. If I acted too slowly, he grabbed my mouse from my hand and took control in my tutorial game, declaring "I'll just show you." It seemed to me as if he could not bear to sit by and watch my character die so easily under my inexperienced control.

After the lab was opened for other gamers to play, one of Devon's friends came in and he wanted to set up a 3 on 3 game with the three of us against three virtual players. Devon quickly agreed to this suggestion. He did not want to play against bots, explaining that, "Computers are stupid. Real people don't just stand there and let you run away from them." We played and I stayed close to Devon. I died several times and had no idea why or how I was dying so fast. Devon told me that my game champion was "squishy" and couldn't take much damage. He didn't really show me how I could avoid getting killed instantly. Our team won but we did so because of my two teammates who took on the three opponents while I waited for my champion to revive from being killed several times.

After the game ended I interviewed Devon, asking about the kind of talk the gamers used as they played. Devon called it "trash talk" and he provided a rationale for its use. With a slight smirk on his face he said, "You do that to get people off their game. If you're saying they're weak blah, blah, blah, they stop thinking about the game and what they're actually doing. Get into their head pretty much."

As an older and more experienced player, Devon was the most critical of the younger, new players. After one gaming session he called some of the younger players stupid with a serious tone instead of the playful taunting they usually used with each other. There was an awkward silence among the group. He preferred not to have inexperienced gamers on his team. I asked him, "When you configure teams, do you try to balance them? Or, is there even a need to balance teams?" He said,

Oh, they try to balance it out. The little kids think they can beat us but -- the little kids -- they don't want to play with us cause we always get mad at them. We go,

‘What are you doing!? What are you doing!?’ And, they don’t want to be on our team. Luc and the other people balance it out. It doesn’t matter to me. It’s better if it’s balanced though cause it’s an even game. If they have too many good people and my team is really, really weak then we lose easy. And I get more frustrated.

To this I asked, “What if it’s the other way around?” Devon answered without hesitation: “It’s fun. But when it’s even it goes back and forth.” For Devon, a sense of control in the game was “fun” even at the cost of minimal challenge from the opposing team.

5.2.4 Rick.

“I guess I like playing with the people more. Cause it’s more competitive. You have bragging rights if you win. Or if you lose, they talk.” This was Rick’s response to whether he preferred playing the game at home or in the gaming class.

A soft-spoken young man with a slim build, Rick was 16 years old, in the 10th grade, and attended an urban public high school. He had lived in the Ridgeway community off and on throughout his life. About a year and a half before, he moved out of the neighborhood again. He visited the community center almost daily when he lived in the area. From his new home, he had to take public transportation to visit his old friends at the community center. He did not attend the community center located in his new neighborhood, because “It wouldn’t be the same,” and he did not “know the people there.” His regular visits were motivated by “the activities that the center does. We used to go play dodge ball at other places. We went roller skating a couple of times, or ice skating. And we did a lot of things.” Rick did not describe experiences in the singular ‘I’ with a focus only on himself; rather participation in activities was described as ‘we’

events. If the community center had no planned activities, Rick and his friends would “just hang out here. Hang out in the lab with other people. When there was a pool table, we would hang out there and just play pool.” In response to the question, “So you’re a good pool player too?” He answered modestly, “Kinda.”

Rick was born in Seattle but moved to Mexico when he was 5 years old, and he remained there for six years. He began playing video games when he was living in Mexico. His first game was Donkey Kong 64 which he played with his older brother. After he and his brother learned to speak Spanish better, they began playing with other people who had the same game system. He spoke “a little bit of English,” and no Spanish when he moved to Mexico. As he explained,

I spoke English alright because I started kindergarten in the U.S. But it was a different kind of English. I guess I got mixed up with my words cause I heard English and Spanish like half of the day. So I guess it was confusing.

What Rick missed most about living in Mexico was “the way you could go out without asking anybody. I don’t know, the freedom. Cause I lived in a small town.” He had not returned to Mexico in recent years but thought he would “probably go back and visit in the future. My grandma’s there and a lot of my uncles.”

Rick thought the staff at the community center was ambiguous, but indicated how they compared to his teachers at school rather vaguely. He said, “I guess it varies with each staff member. ... The people here at the center are nicer. They’re more laid back and stuff.” In response to the question, “What kind of stuff?,” he laughed softly. Another probe, “How does

staff react when you do something you are not supposed to do and how does that compare to what school staff do?," elicited the following conversation:

Rick: Ah, I've never really done anything.

Researcher: What about when other people do something? What have you seen happen?

Rick: I've seen people get kicked out. That's probably it.

Researcher: Would you say that's the same kind of treatment as at school?

Rick: Kinda.

Researcher: How's it different?

Rick: I guess it's more serious at school. It's something you *have* to go to.

Rick was described by Luc as probably the most advanced player among the group in playing *League of Legends*. So I asked him about other digital games he played. With a patient calmness he explained,

I started playing *Warcraft III (DOTA)* at the center. They got me in it, so I started playing it with them. But I wasn't very good. I downloaded the game [*League of Legends*] and it was almost the same thing [as *DOTA*] so I started playing it. And then I showed them [the other gamers] and they started playing it and then everybody was playing it.

Ironically, Rick was one of the less skilled players with the previous game played by the group, *DOTA*. *League of Legends* was an alternative that met his personal needs, interests, and

abilities. With his growing competence, he introduced the new game to his social peer group and it met their needs and interest as well. It took a member of the social group to identify a new game for the group, and to demonstrate how competence in it could be attained.

Rick had been playing *League of Legends* for about two years, “since week 2 of its coming out [to the public]. It was free, and that gave the group the option to play it at home. Rick recalled, “The staff here [at the community center] didn’t like us playing DOTA all day, so they banned DOTA.” The gamers were allowed to play only during the digital gaming class one time per week. They started playing *League of Legends* since they could play during other times at the center as well. That game was not banned, nor controlled with an access code that only the staff was privy to. Since the gaming class was held between 7 and 9 p.m., the time interfered with Rick’s soccer practice. He stopped attending the digital gaming class once he discovered *League of Legends*. However, other gamers in the class did not immediately switch over. When they finally did, Rick was already comfortably playing at home and was ahead of them in experience and knowledge of the game.

Rick also provided perspectives on how playing at home was different from playing in the gaming class that he only rejoined while it was at the software store. He said, “It’s easier to talk to the other players. You can just talk and stuff instead of type it all.” When he played at home, Rick typed messages in the game chat box. More recently, he used the video chat program, Skype, that Flash convinced him to use after teaming together against virtual gamers. To Rick’s knowledge, no one else in the class used Skype. I could not help but speculate, “at least not at the moment.”

Some of the messages the gamers sent to each other in the chat box were taunts and boasts. So I asked Rick, “Don’t people brag by writing messages in the game chat box?” Rick laughed and said, “You could, but it’s not as strong.” Because of the “bragging rights” he had mentioned earlier, I asked Rick, “What’s so appealing about talking smack to the other guys? If you were playing the game with girls would talking smack be the same?” He responded, “Ah-- I’m really not sure. ... It’s fun. ... [With girls] probably not. I just respect girls more than guys.”

Since Rick was acknowledged by other players as being so knowledgeable about the game, I wondered if he performed well in school. So I asked, “What kind of grades do you get at school?” He said, “Usually good grades. But sometimes not good when I don’t do a couple of works or something.” His favorite subject “used to be math,” but he admitted, “I’m in pre-calculus and it got really hard. So it doesn’t seem to be my favorite anymore. Sometimes I don’t understand it. And it used to be easy to do.” Rick thought tutoring would help because he already was staying after school sometimes to get help from the teacher.

Rick did not specify exactly where he imagined himself to ten years in the future. Instead, he listed several aspirations he might pursue after high school. These included

Probably – college. I’m not sure what to study yet. ...Before I used to want to be a mechanical engineer. And I don’t know what changed my mind. Then I wanted to be a lawyer; an immigration lawyer based on my beliefs. And right now, I’m not sure.

After reminding Rick that all information shared with me would be kept confidential, I again probed his academic performance in school by asking, “What is your GPA?” He

responded, “You mean my real GPA right now? It’s about 1.8.” This seemed a contradiction since earlier he said he usually did well in school. I was not sure if he considered this average as doing well so I asked, “What has been your highest GPA in the past?” He answered, “Probably 4.0 when I started.” Rick entered high school just after turning 15. His grades began to decline after he started skipping school with friends. In response to, “Why did you start skipping school?” he surmised,

Guess it was peer pressure cause my friends were like, ‘Oh, yeah, we should skip and go do this and do that.’ And I didn’t want to. But they would say, ‘Come on, let’s skip.’ And I would say, ‘No, I don’t want to.’ And they would be like – just talking smack basically.

He was doubtful that he would ever have a 4.0 again “since you have to get As in everything. But I’ll raise it. I’m getting back on track.” I later learned from community center staff that Rick struggled with distancing himself from gang affiliations.

According to Rick he had been suspended from school only once. He recalled, “[It was] middle school -- for fireworks. The teacher was like, ‘Oh yeah, he has them.’ And they suspended me for that!” Rick admitted to fighting in school but he was not suspended because “they didn’t know. We had like a fighting spot. (He laughs.) We had a lot of fights there -- different people.”

As our conversation shifted to teaching me how to play *League of Legends*, I asked Rick how many champions he knew how to play with. With a slight smile he said, “About half [of them] ... there are 95 total.” His favorite type of champion to control in the game changed over

time. He said, “Recently I started playing with a guy with medium ability power cause you can combo [use a combination of the champion’s weapons and abilities] somebody and they die... you use your four abilities in a row and they die.” At first he preferred playing with tank champions. With more experience and knowledge of the game he tried other champions and his preferences changed. He still liked to play “Mundo, who can regenerate and get his health back really, really, fast.” Rick explained that he liked Mundo because

Tanks [a category of game champions] can take a lot of damage before dying. Buffs [game challenges that increase a champion’s attributes when successfully completed] increase his attack damage by a lot. He has really, really good ganks [abilities that enable the champion to sneak up and gang up on opponents]. When you’re hiding in the bush and they are playing one-on-one and you come out of nowhere and you turn it into two --one and one [the champion splits into two characters], and you kill them. (He provided more details about Mundo’s “good ganks.”) Cause his ‘Q’ (The letter Q on the keyboard used as a control key.) is a cleaver that you throw at somebody and it slows them. So they start walking slower. And since you have red buff [enhancing the attribute of a champion’s attack damage], your ‘E’ boosts your attack damage. And you can just attack them and [they] get slowed, and it takes a lot of health from them -- especially if your partner is attacking them with you. They die really fast.

Rick was able to articulate the minute details of the game that the other tutors omitted. For example, he explained that most players wait to buy runes until they reach a higher level so that they can buy the stronger ones.

Since Rick was so dedicated, I wondered if he bought skins. He did, but not many. He used his IP (influence points accrued each time a gamer plays) to buy two skins and a champion to prepare for his participation in his first tournament at the software store.

Another question I pondered was how Rick learned so many details about the game. Part of it was due to information sharing among gamers. He said, “Throughout the game, people tell you different stuff.” This was somewhat confusing since he played mostly at home. He clarified that as he played with different people he added them to his profile as friends and they communicated through typed messages where they shared information. I wondered about how much reading and writing gamers were doing through this process.

Rick and I spent the last minutes of our tutoring session playing a 5 on 5 game with virtual players. He encouraged me to create the game so that I would be matched with players who played at my level, advising “That way you’ll learn better.” He suggested I should choose, “Ryze, since he’s pretty easy and he’s kinda tanky [can take a lot of damage without dying].” Rick coached me throughout the duration of the game, rarely leaving my side – or I should say -- Ryze’s side.

5.2.5 Biggie.

I'm not going to lie, it was the game [that brought me to the gaming class every week]. Cause the game was addicting. ... DOTA got you addicted. But after a while it got boring, cause the same thing over and over again. League of Legends is like weekly – new people [champions] coming in keeps it going. It's like the story keeps changing.

This was Biggie's reasoning for the participants of the gaming class abandoning their previous game, *Warcraft III – DOTA*, and moving on to the current game of choice.

I sat down with Biggie in the computer lab and attempted to begin our session by asking him questions about himself. We were not alone in the lab since Biggie brought three of his friends with him, including Flash. All of them immediately sat down at the computers and opened up *League of Legends*. Biggie clicked on the same website as I questioned him before we began playing. He did not want to talk about himself in front of his friends and he asked if we could talk privately afterwards. I agreed and turned the conversation to the game by asking him about the number of champions he knew how to play. He responded, "I got -- I think over 50. [I know how to control] most of them – not all of them. ... I know how to play about 10 real well. The others, I'm just okay." He later opened up his profile page and turned his computer screen toward me so that I could see how many champions he could control in a game.

Biggie had been playing *League of Legends* for about one year. The previous game, *Warcraft III DOTA*, was a more difficult game to play since, "You got to control more things. With this [game] you just gotta control one person, that's it." Biggie affirmed that he had bought skins for some of his favorite champions but said,

Just a few, that's it. I don't buy that many. I don't buy no more. I don't play no more. Some people have seven skins for one person. And he [pointing to Flash] has like, 30? He maxed out his credit card just buying skins. [He and his friends laugh.]

Biggie was 19 years old, stood about 5'10" tall, and had a stocky build. He was born and raised in the Ridgeway neighborhood until he moved to an adjacent neighborhood when he was 15 years old. He still attended the Ridgeway Community Center and the gaming class after he moved. Both of his parents were born in Mexico but Biggie had never been there. Although he had extended family in Mexico he had no desire to visit and stated, "All I hear is bad stories about it, so why would I go?" He spoke English and sometimes spoke Spanish with Ruben, Flash, or Rick during the gaming class. They shared secret game strategies, or inside jokes in their first language. Biggie seemed to enjoy laughing and joking with the much younger 12 year-old Ruben. They sometimes played against each other virtually, Biggie from his home and Ruben from the community center lab.

While the gaming class was held at the software store, Biggie attended regularly as he did when the group played the *Warcraft III (DOTA)* digital game. One evening, while he waited for the software store instructor to set up for the class, Biggie turned on music from a website and played a rap song that everyone could hear. When Luc heard the song he asked Biggie, "Are the lyrics clean?" Biggie, with a big grin on his face, did not hesitate to respond, "Yeah." Within seconds one profane word after another boomed from Biggie's laptop. He laughed out loud and with the same big grin he turned the music off.

The first digital computer game Biggie played was *Age of Empires* at the Ridgeway Community Center. He was 10 years old and “really did not care very much about playing.” He became more interested in playing *Warcraft III* since it allowed him to be creative. He learned how to build his own town and champions in the game. When the group in the gaming class started playing the *DOTA* version of *Warcraft III*, he became even more interested. During the last year, he mostly played *League of Legends* at home but came back to the gaming class while it was held at the software store. By the time of our tutoring and interview session, he did not play much at all anymore. Most of his friends were into a new game called *Diablo* but he did not play that a lot either since it cost money and he did not want to buy the game disc.

Biggie recalled that he attended two local public high schools and while enrolled in the first, he skipped school most days. After his family moved, his attendance at school improved and by his senior year he regularly attended and was able to graduate. I later learned that Biggie was a couple of credits short of earning his diploma, and despite their counsel and pleas, community center staff were not successful in convincing him to return to school.

A favorite subject of Biggie’s was photography since he “usually slept in class.” Before that, math was a subject he “loved” but it became his least favorite subject since “it started to get harder and harder, until it got really hard.” Although Biggie credited the teachers as supportive, he “just didn’t feel like doing it [math] no more.” He explained that he lost interest in math just as he had recently lost interest in the game, *League of Legends*. He said,

I faded away from *League of Legends*. I started going out more and stuff. I used to play once in a while when I got home and had nothing to do. And when I logged on I’d see Luc on [-line] and I’d play one or two games with him. Then I’d

get off. Then I got a virus on my computer, and I restored my laptop. ... I just didn't feel like downloading the *League of Legends* game again. I downloaded other things I needed, like YouTube and stuff like that.

Before his interest waned, Biggie enjoyed playing *League of Legends* more at the community center "because you can actually talk to people that are right there next to you instead of using your microphone when you talk to people online." He also used the Skype computer telephone when he teamed with some of the other gamers. According to Biggie, talking with his teammates was the only thing that made playing at the community center more appealing. He also pointed out another common interest among the group when he said, "They all play sports." Biggie played basketball at the community center with some of the gamers and football in high school.

This preference for the communal experience of playing digital games lead to my comment and question: "I noticed that you guys like to talk a lot of stuff to each other. Do you enjoy that?" Biggie's response brought to the surface some of his goals in playing the game with his teammates. He said,

It [smack talk] doesn't matter to me. It's a game. We say stuff to each other but it's just a game. We help each other when there's something ... It's basically like you want to be the leader of the game. Everybody wants to be that part. We'll help each other cause you want to be the leader to win the game. But you got to do things solo by yourself to get there. The solo part is if you want to be the leader – the game carrier. The leader of the whole – basically. Not the good stats, but the person that did the best in helping the team...like the star of the team.

I probed further by asking, “What do you do to be the star of the team?” Biggie indicated the necessity of positioning himself to take on greater challenges than his teammates. He stated,

For me, I ask the person that’s in my [game] lane to go somewhere else. Like go bottom to help them out so there will be 2 verses 1 on bottom and I can be 1 verses 2 on top. Cause I like going against two other people. It gets me more experience, more money [game points], and I can get more kills from them.

This led me to ask, “But don’t you get killed more often when there are two against you?” His response revealed a willingness to take risks based on an expected payoff when he affirmed,

Not when it’s me. Cause for me you think of the strategies about what could happen but you also gotta think of the money you’re going to spend to buy these things so that you won’t die or get jumped. I get stronger by myself. I could get all the creeps [minions] instead of sharing [kills] with a partner. When’s there’s two [of us] I get half the money, half the items to me. But with just me, I get more items and more of the money to me and I’ll get to kill them both [opponents] at the same time. Basically, it’s experience, that’s what I want.

Biggie claimed that from the very beginning of his game playing experience, he preferred “going solo.” After we played a game during the tutoring session, he reflected on his actions in the game we played when he explained, “I would have gone jungling but you weren’t developed enough [in the beginning of a game] to go by yourself. If you were, I would have gone everywhere.”

Biggie's perception of himself and other gamers suggested that his gaming experiences provided him the opportunities for him to construct his own reality as illustrated in the following exchange.

Researcher: Who would you say out of the group is the most advanced player?

Biggie: I would say me but I really don't play no more. But it has to be Flash.

Researcher: But somebody told me it was Rick.

Biggie: Rick! No. He's the one that founded it for us. But Rick, he's not good at all. He plays 24 – 7 [24 hours, 7 days a week]. Not like us. We're all his level. He just plays it way more than us.

Researcher: So if you were to play against Rick you would win?

Biggie: I already played against him a couple of times. But – it's just that he's been playing so long, and more than me, that he has way more runes to go with the heroes and I don't. I only got runes for one person. He has runes for several. The more time you play, the more you get better, but he's not really good. What he got when he was playing, all the experience and what he earned and all. And I didn't earn that.

Biggie's assessment of himself as one of the superior gamers was surprising. He often ordered the younger players to do things in the game or made critical statements about their gaming actions. Then later Biggie would get "ganked" and killed by one or a group of the

younger “noob” gamers. Ruben liked to challenge Biggie to one-on-one battles and when he accepted, Ruben often won.

Biggie’s response to questions about Rick’s gaming success suggested some complexities about Biggie’s thought processes and perceptions. First, Biggie’s experiences in the game provided him with flexibility to interpret his successes and defeats in a way that allowed him to perceive himself as superior instead of inferior. Second, the mechanics of the game provided the liberty for him to rationalize a paradox, “The more time you play, the more you get better. But he’s [Rick] not really good.” The game points Rick received for time playing the game, not his skill, was how Biggie rationalized Rick’s success in defeating him and the other gamers. Biggie was not daunted by the notion that Rick was a more knowledgeable and skilled player. From Biggie’s perspective Rick simply invested far more time to collect the points that placed him in an advantageous position over the other gamers, and this was a nebulous position that could change over time.

5.3 Summary

These individual profiles indicate that there were both much unity and diversity among the ten players of *League of Legends* who participated in this study. The diversifying factors stemmed from their individuality. Each gamer brought his own uniqueness and personality that spanned over a spectrum of difference including demography, family composition and history, school academic and discipline records, values and beliefs, aspirations, and time spent within the Ridgeway Community Center and neighborhood.

The unifying factors encompassed a set of common values that included motivating factors for engagement such as community interaction, pleasure in playing the game, multiple instructional supports, experiential practice, challenges that expanded existing knowledge and skills, steady progression toward greater competency, public acknowledgement of competency among peers, and acknowledgement of individual and group identification. A paramount value among the gamers was their community interaction that rested on their collective acceptance of Luc as the prototypical model of community values and behaviors. They generally followed Luc's modeling of sharing knowledge and exacting expectations for group membership. With this acceptance, participants benefited from individual direct instruction and through observations of Luc and each other as they moved through trajectories of learning the digital game and development toward more responsible citizenship in and obligation to their community.

Chapter 6

PORTRAIT OF IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT PROCESSES

Through their interactions with the game, each other, and others in their gaming context, gamers in this study constructed who they are. These identities were manifested by what they said and did in these contexts. The manifestations were compiled to create a composite portrait of the members of the Ridgeway Community Center gaming class. This group portrait serves as a means for examining their male identity construction processes.

Since portraiture requires recording contextual changes over time, composites of group interactions have been carefully selected and are presented as eight different gaming sessions. The setting of the first five is the software store where the gaming class was held for ten weeks. The last three sessions take place in the home setting of the class, the Ridgeway Community Center. Dialogues included in the descriptions of these sessions were taken directly from observation notes of the gaming classes. The first gaming class is presented as week 4 in the software store. It represents the first few weeks of observations of the class in that environment and is meant to illustrate initial impressions of the gamers and their interactions. The remaining seven class descriptions focus on the middle and end periods of data collection in the field. Through close interactions with the gamers through individual tutoring sessions, and a growing knowledge of the mechanics of the digital game, my observation reflections and interpretations increasingly became more insightful during these periods.

The descriptions of the gaming sessions are recounted in the present tense in an effort to bring the reader into the scenes and dialogues. Portraiture is meant to capture the “essence” of the group. Placing the reader in the midst of the group’s words and actions may invoke that

essence. Interwoven through the gaming class scenes and dialogues are initial interpretations of the actions and comments of the gamers as they engage constructing identities.

6.1 Setting Rules and Claiming Roles

The gaming class from the Ridgeway Community Center is meeting for the fourth time at a Microsoft software store north of the downtown area at an upscale shopping mall. The store's large glass front beckons visitors to step inside and experience the many wonders of technology that can be glimpsed from the outside parking lot. The store is the size of a gymnasium but seems smaller with its many displays of computers and digital games set up for visitors to try out. The gaming class meets at the back of the store where a large screen, approximately 4 feet by 6 feet, hangs on the wall. Luc, the community center supervisor of the gaming class, has driven the class participants across town at the height of rush hour traffic. They arrive 20 minutes before the class is scheduled to begin. There are usually only 9 gamers in the group and Luc plays to round out the 5 on 5 teams. However, today there are 10 gamers. The younger gamers, ("the noobs") include Trey, Ruben, Harry, Julius and John. Of the older gamers, ("the beasts") there are Wizard, Flash, Devon, Biggie, and Rick, who has accompanied the group to the software store for the first time.

The gamers use the time before the class begins to explore and experiment with games on display. Computers line the walls and center floor of the large, well lit store. Most of the computer screens are lit up and entice the gamers to stop, look, and engage. Shoppers move from one display to another as do the Ridgeway gamers. Ruben abandons one football digital game stating, "I don't like this game. It's stupid." I ask him what is wrong with it and he answers, "I don't know how to play." Nearby Harry responds, "Yeah, I didn't get it either."

Ruben quickly moves to a nearby game that entails a simulation for slicing fruit with a digital imaginary sword. He flays his arms around, then his legs, slicing icons of fruit that float on the screen. “Hey Luc, come play with me,” he shouts. Half distracted by the game he was exploring, Luc answers him, “Okay. Is it set up for two players?” Ruben tells him it is and Luc walks over and joins the action. The points they earn are displayed on the screen and for a while they are tied. Luc makes a mistake and Ruben pulls ahead. When Luc makes another mistake, Ruben leaves him further behind. Although Luc is the adult and the supervisor of the gaming class, the game he plays with Ruben positions them as equals. This context of digital gaming seems to place the adult teacher in a similar position as the child student. The exchanges are often unencumbered power differentials as adult and child learn together, sometimes starting from the same place, and sometimes with the youth demonstrating high levels of competency.

A few minutes before the class is scheduled to begin, the software store instructor and Luc begin to set up the long folding tables against the backdrop of the large screen on the back wall. Luc asks the younger gamers, (Trey, Ruben Harry, Julius, and John) to help with the set up. Trey and Ruben laugh and Trey comments, “We’re in the final part of this game and he thinks we’re going to stop and put up tables.” Ruben is back at the same digital football game he had abandoned earlier. He has become engaged with it in partnership with Trey. The other boys ignore Luc’s request without any acknowledgement. Luc repeats his request specifically to Harry and John, the two most quiet and compliant boys of the group. Both of them go over and assist with the tables.

One-by-one the gamers move into the area and take a seat in a “u” configuration facing outward. The older gamers cluster together on the right side of the seating arrangement, the

younger ones on the left. The store instructor passes out the laptop computers, one at a time to each gamer. Each sets up his own computer and mouse, logs on, and begins the individual ritual of checking his profile in the game of *League of Legends*. The profile page is used as a resource to monitor one's progress, to inform goal setting, and as a record to demonstrate one's success to other gamers. Examples of dialogue among the players illustrate these uses of the profile page.

Ruben: Hey look! I'm at a level 28. What level are you at Harry?

Harry: Twenty-eight.

Trey: Look how many kills and assists I got. How many RPs [Riot Points] you got?

Wizard: [to Rick] You got six pages of Runes? How'd you get so many?

Rick: I just play, man. You got to play a lot.

The store gaming instructor welcomes the group and announces that today he will go over the technique of "jungling" [where the game champion roams throughout the bushes of the game map]. He begins to set up a customized game but when he completes it, the game crashes. He determines it must be due to a firewall program and he begins to troubleshoot the problem. Flash and Wizard make suggestions to him as to what he can do to disable the firewall. When the problem is solved, Flash makes another suggestion regarding a tutorial he has accessed before. "The guide I looked up was called 'General Jungle.' Try Googling it," he advises. The store instructor follows Flash's advice and brings up the tutorial. As issues arise in the gaming class, the knowledge of gamers who take the initiative to learn details of the game outside of the class is often made public. The gamers, except Devon, follow the demonstration. He continues to click his mouse and study his computer screen.

After several minutes of watching the large wall screen and listening to the gaming instructor, some of the gamers begin to lose interest and click their computer mouse, or converse about what is displayed on their screens. The instructor asks, “Anyone think they want to try jungling after watching that?” No one immediately responds. It seems like a repeat of what happened a week before when the group was asked if anyone wanted to try the support role. “Anyone who wants to start jungling, I’ll set you up,” the instructor offers. Ruben was the first to respond:

Ruben: I’ll try jungling.

Wizard: I want to jungle.

Biggie: I want to jungle too.

Devon: Two people can’t jungle.

Devon appeared not to have been paying attention to the instructor’s presentation yet he considers himself qualified to speak on the matter. Teams are configured and some discussion ensues as to who will take the role of jungling on each team. Jungling allows a team member the freedom to roam across the battlefield map, taking buffs to increase his powers, and hiding in “the jungle” to surprise enemy opponents. Unlike the support role, jungling is a power role many in the group are anxious to play.

The younger players want to play together on the same team. During the first game, teams are configured with nominal mixing of younger and older players. One team consists of Devon, Biggie, Wizard, Flash, and Harry, who is the youngest and the only “noob” gamer. On the other team are Trey, Ruben, Julius, John, and Rick (the oldest and only experienced gamer on

the team). “I’ll set up this laptop in spectator mode so you can see the action of the game you play later,” the store instructor announces. He reminds them, “Remember the game action will be displayed on the screen with a two minute delay.”

Luc sits close to John, Trey, Ruben, and Julius to coach these less experienced gamers. On the other team, Wizard and Flash direct Harry where he should go on the map. This is followed by Biggie’s counter commands to the “noob.” The older more experienced gamers appointment themselves as coaches to the newer gamers, as evident in the following exchange:

Wizard: Harry, go bottom.

Flash: Yeah, you should go bottom, Harry.

Harry: Why should I go bottom?

Wizard: Go Harry! Go!

Biggie: You go Flash.

Flash: Harry get back! Harry get back!

Biggie: Stay right there, Harry.

The game battle ensues and Harry finally says, “I’m dead.” The team made up of the four veteran gamers dominate the game throughout. They express their advantageous position through boasts and taunts such as,

Wizard: Get beasted on, Boy!

Devon: Get off me, Boy! You don’t want to fight me.

Biggie: Where you at, Rick?! Harry no! No!

Harry: You can take him!

Biggie: Don't get too cocky.

Harry: I'm getting there first so nobody's going to catch me.

Devon: Don't go there, Harry.

Flash: Which one of them has low health?

Harry: Him! He does.

Harry makes a move to take the kill and the more experienced gamers object. They view this as a "kill-steal," when a player weakens an opponent and a teammate comes along to finish him off and gets the credit for the kill. The experienced gamers coach Harry in the norms of game play and attempt to mentor him to make productive moves in his game play. Harry is not always receptive of his coaches' advice, and sometimes resists and asserts his own autonomy. For example,

Wizard: [to Harry] Stop! Stop! Stop!

Devon: Don't finish it. Back up.

Biggie: Harry, you follow me.

Harry: No, you follow me!

The other team with the four less experienced gamers quickly loses the game. The winning team members immediately turn their attention to the large screen on the back wall.

They laugh and provide commentary on the last two minutes of the game. It is critical commentary directed at gamers who demonstrate substandard skill. It is also a means of individual public acknowledgement; gamers call attention to their power and their accomplishments in the game. Another aspect of this public recognition is to avoid appearing incompetent among the group. Sometimes gamers defend their actions and self-image during this game “debrief.” Sometimes Luc defends the self-image of the younger gamers when they are the targets of criticism, as he does here:

Wizard: This is where I beasted on Rick. How did Harry get eight kills?!

Flash: Cause he’s Boss! Right Harry?

Devon: That’s where Ruben got raped.

Flash: Look at Julius running away.

Luc: Is that even funny? They’re just learning. We’re going to switch up the teams to make it more even.

Biggie: Well, I’m not taking Ruben. He don’t listen. How about we do this –

Biggie offers a plan for creating the new teams, and ends up having Ruben on his side after all. The new configuration for one team is Devon, Wizard, Flash, Julius, and John. To better follow the dialogue of the teams, this team is referred to as the red team (R). On the other team there are Rick, Biggie, Harry, Ruben, and Trey. This team is referred to as the blue team (B). Trey repositions his screen so that Flash, who is sitting next to him, will not be able to see it during game play. A store employee brings out a tray of snacks for the group and walks away.

Julius gets up and carries away a can of fruit juice. Trey corrects his actions: “Julius, not yet. Not yet,” he says. Julius hesitates a moment, turns around, walks back over to the tray and places the can back on it. The younger Trey corrects the actions of the older boy and Julius accepts his direction. The rule is, drinks should not be placed near the computers and should only be taken when the instructor announces it is time for a break.

Devon is on the red team and he instantly begins to direct the actions of the two newer players. A dialogue between team members on the red team illustrates a power differential between the more experienced and less experienced gamers.

Devon: Julius, watch out!

Julius: What?

Devon: Watch out! Watch out! Here they come. Hey Flash! You guys watch out, too.

Julius: What?

Devon: Are you Flash?!

Julius: Oh – No.

Devon: Warwick [John’s game champion]! What are you doing?! Tell me where you’re going. Type it or something!

Julius: [to Devon] I’m just learning.

Wizard: Dammit Flash!

Flash: I wasn’t trying to steal that kill from you.

Devon: You better start buying your items, Warwick [John]!

Wizard: Give me manna. [He laughs at his screen after taking one of the buffs in the game.]

Devon: No, stay there! Come on! Back up, Warwick [John]! You're like playing scary. You're supposed to be killing people. ... Warwick, I'll be back real quick. Alright?

John: Okay.

Wizard: Booy! Get off me, Harry!

Julius: I'm new.

Devon: You seen me? Stay with me. Group up everybody!

Julius: Uh oh. Uh oh. Your team's not all that sneaky. They are all in camo [camouflage]. Thanks for staying in our range [of fire].

Devon: No, Warwick! Stay here, Warwick! I'll be back.

John: But I want to go too [back to base].

Devon: You're doing fine. Alright, you can go back... Warwick, you can go back.

Julius: Come here chickee, chickee. Oh naughty. I'm not pushing any more than this. You got this, Wizard?

Wizard: No, stay there.

Julius: I'll be right back.

Devon: No, stay there! Warwick, kill them! Pleeeese kill them, Warwick! Warwick, after I do this you come with me. Hear me?!

John: Yeah.

Wizard: Booy! Booy! Booy! I beasted on you!

Devon: Come on! I got my special here [ultimate weapon]. Hey Flash, can you help me?

Thank you! ...Hey Warwick, come get this.

[John kills the opponent Devon asked him to “come get.”]

Devon: Oh my gosh!!! You *took* it!

John: You sad, ‘Come get it.’

Devon: No! I mean *help* me.

John: Oh – sorry.

John had moved in and taken the kill from Devon for a “kill-steal.” John may have misunderstood Devon’s implied meaning due to a cultural difference in their use of speech. Devon is African American and John is Salvadorian. Devon is the most demanding of the experienced gamers. His commands and criticisms are delivered in a manner that gives little space for the younger gamers to rebel and assert their own autonomy. In subsequent gaming class sessions, some of the younger gamers avoided being teamed with him more so than some of the other experienced gamers. This conclusion is reinforced by some of the comments the younger gamers made during individual interviews with them.

On the blue team, there are two veteran players, Biggie and Rick, and the younger “trio” friendship group made up of Trey, Ruben, and Harry. Rick and Biggie sit next to each other whispering strategies for their team. Luc looks over the shoulders of the younger gamers and gives them advice. Sometimes Biggie interjects commands. An exchange between the blue team members illustrates a similar pattern of experienced gamers taking on the role of coach to those with less experience. On this team, however, the younger, less experienced friendship-trio assert more of their autonomy and sometimes openly defy the commands and advice of Luc and Biggie.

Luc: Run Trey. Don't just keep taking that.

Biggie: Start fighting. Go top [of the battleground map]. Harry, you stay.

Luc: Run Puppy [Ruben's game User ID], run! Keep running. Don't fight. Trey, don't fight.

Trey: I thought you guys had me.

Trey continues to fight and his champion dies. He must wait 45 seconds for his champion to regenerate and come back to life before he can reenter the game. Ruben asks the store instructor what he should buy next for his champion.

Trey: Harry, don't let them hit the tank. [Trey slaps the palm of his hand to his forehead.]

Luc: Puppy just heal. Please heal. [Ruben wants to continue to do battle with very little health.]

Biggie: Harry, don't push. Run!

Luc: Gangplank! [a game champion pirate who leapt out and surprised them]

Biggie: Harry leave! Just leave!

Harry: Biggie, which one [should I buy]? No, I don't want that one. Awww, okay. [He buys what Biggie advises him to get.]

Biggie: Ruben, stay with me.

Ruben: I need some money, Dog.

Rick: Where are you guys?! I swear. You're a bunch of noobs!

Ruben goes off roaming the battlefield to accrue "money." By the time he returns his teammates have been killed. He uses his ultimate weapon and gets a "double kill" against the opposing team.

Ruben: I just got a double kill! Look!

Biggie: You did it hella late though. You could have saved all our lives.

Luc: Good job, minions. Puppy [Ruben], go up top with Rick.

Ruben: Luc, look how much damage I got!

Luc: Yeah, I know. Hit the damage dealers, not the tanks. Trey you've got to delay the middle, okay?

Rick: Hey Harry, what are you doing?! What a noob.

Ruben: Why would you guys go for a tank? Oh, Biggie just died.

Biggie: I went for Wizard [controlling the tank champion] like you told me to!

The older gamers have been critical of Ruben before. He is known as a “troller” who doesn’t take the game seriously since he roams around the battlefield racking up points on his own instead of heeding the requests of his teammates to carry out their group plan. After a game is played, the older gamers sometimes insist on trading Ruben to the other team due to this maverick behavior. Those who fail to abide by the group norm of team cooperation are publicly admonished. However, Ruben is given an opportunity to correct his behavior in subsequent games when he is traded and accepted on the alternative team to which he is reassigned.

The coaching by the more experienced gamers on both teams includes commands, verbal recognition for tasks well done, and berating poor performance or failing to meet group expectations. The younger gamers sometimes rebel by not doing what they are told, or, they talk back to the older players. Despite the rebellion, the younger gamers sometimes mimic the behavior of the older ones. They shout commands, congratulate each other and themselves for exceptional performance in the game, or criticize behaviors frowned on by the group. Commands are intrinsic in this digital game since the act of playing requires communicating what needs to be done. Thus, giving directions to teammates is not always a unilateral process between the old and new gamers.

Luc’s coaching in the game is often in the form of requests. When the boys do not follow Luc’s advice, he sometimes follows up by reminding them that they chose not to do what he advised them to do. He reinforces the notion that negative consequences are often a result of a gamer’s own autonomous choices.

The second game ends in defeat for the blue team. Despite the Red Team win, Devon immediately makes a critical statement of his colleagues, “You guys are so stupid, I swear!” For a moment there is a hush among the group at hearing this. While critical statements are a norm in this group, they are generally delivered in a joking, taunting, or challenging manner. Devon’s statement is delivered in a way that berates the individual characters of his teammates. It is not followed with the usual laughter and concurrences offered by others in agreement. Nor is his statement met with defensive explanations for game actions. The group does not directly acknowledge Devon’s statement. When they do begin to speak, they talk about their individual performances and sometimes make fun of individual players’ weaknesses in the game. The following dialogue is an example of the more normative tone and text of these exchanges:

Flash: I know I did my job to support.

Biggie: Julius was nothing. Noob.

Flash: Does it ever look like Julius is going to do anything?

Devon: He only knows how to play one person [game champion]!

Biggie: [pointing while touching the screen] Watch me! Watch me!

Ruben: Look at me right there!

Luc: I think the teams were pretty even. Up until that last fight, it was pretty even.

This group is critical of players who have limited knowledge of and competency in playing various game champions. This kind of public criticism is a challenge, in this case to Julius who is expected to experiment with and learn to play different game champions. In

subsequent classes, the gamers who play against him take measures to prevent Julius from using the one champion he knows how to play well. They also become accustomed to the strategies Julius uses with his favorite champion, so they are better able to anticipate his moves. This renders Julius virtually ineffective over time. He must expand his knowledge of the game or he may “perish” within this group of gamers.

The Microsoft store instructor announces that everyone is improving in game knowledge and skills. Wizard, who rarely speaks when not playing the game, tells John, “I know you’re better than Trey and Ruben. They suck balls.” Wizard is teasing Trey and Ruben who are more experienced and skillful than John. The group discusses the configuration of teams for the third and final game of the session. They want to keep the teams as they are. This time Trey’s team surrenders when there is no hope of them winning. A few in the group engage in a discussion about surrendering.

Trey: You guys didn’t win.

Devon: If you surrender that means we win.

Luc: If you surrender when we still have enough time to finish the game it’s considered a win. If we were running out of time and you surrender for that reason, it’s not really a win for the other team.

Sometimes debate occurs over what should be considered a win for a team when the other team surrenders. A team may surrender when its members are sure they will not win. Then, the surrendering team will attempt to diminish its loss by claiming it is not a win for the

other team since the game was surrendered. Wins and losses are sources of pride or humiliation, respectively. Teams attempt to avoid humiliation and work toward the public glory of winning.

In the first few weeks of data collection, a few group characteristics emerged and became a basis for a beginning portrait of this group's processes of identity construction as gamers and males. Most notably is the hierarchical arrangement with newer, younger and less experienced gamers having less power and status in the assessment of more experienced gamers ("beasts"). "Beasts" credit themselves with more power and status as evidenced by them claiming the role of coach. Their power is derived primarily from their ability to defeat and sometimes embarrass the less experienced players. While age differences contribute partially to the hierarchy, it is not the most weighted factor. The experienced gamers range in ages from 16 to 19. Among them, their criticisms, praises, or solicitations for advice move across age and appear to be predicated on what knowledge and skills a gamer demonstrates in the game, not his chronological age. This hierarchical arrangement influences other patterns of interaction within the group. In their role as coaches, the more experienced "beasts" inculcate the newer players ("noobs") with the norms of the gaming community. Individual and team accountability rules are communicated and reinforced in particular ways. Expectations for communicating, learning, and acting in and outside of the game are relayed both explicitly and implicitly. The success of this inculcation is evidenced by how the younger, more inexperienced gamers mimic the older, experienced ones.

Other interactions are influenced by this hierarchy since gamers constantly challenge it. The newer gamers sometimes resist being dispersed and placed on teams made up primarily of the older, more experienced gamers. Sometimes when mixed ability teams are created, the less experienced gamers refuse to comply with the demands of the more experienced gamers. In

mimicking the experienced gamers, they attempt to step into the role of coach for themselves. The descriptions of the gaming classes that follow illustrate these interactions among the gamers.

6.2 Extending Knowledge and Competence

It is Winter Break in the public schools and only five gamers accompany Luc to the Microsoft store for the gaming class. They engage in their usual habit of exploring and experimenting with digital games on display. Trey is at a computer monitor where a menacing monster character is roaring on the screen. He barely acknowledges me when I stop to say hello. Once the folding tables are set up, the gamers and Luc connect the laptop computers that have been issued to them. The instructor greets the small group and asks about the others who are absent. “They weren’t sure that we would be meeting since it is Winter Break at their school,” Luc explains. The instructor follows up on a previous lesson on “jungling” rather than cover new material others would miss. He demonstrates with specific champions that are good for the role of jungling in the game:

Store Instructor: For jungling your champion needs sustainability. This includes champions like Leesh, Udyr, Warwick, and Trundle.

Harry: What about Tryndamere? I like to use him.

Flash: Anybody can play with Tryndamere. You need to try somebody different.

This exchange illustrates a challenge posed outside of the game. Flash diminishes Harry’s expertise with his preferred game champion, and reveals the expectation that Harry needs to learn to play with other champions. A wider knowledge of different champions gives gamers more options of what roles they can choose to play in the game. If a gamer does not know how to

control champions who are best suited for a particular role, he is not able to effectively play that role in the game, such as jungling. This is a kind of embedded challenge within the mechanics of the game that forces gamers to expand their knowledge. Learning how to play different champions who are suited for different roles is empowering. It may also garner more respect among the gamers whose expertise is not at risk of being diminished, as was the case with Harry.

With so few gamers in the class session, teams are configured as 3 on 3. One team consists of Luc, Trey, and John. Luc takes the two younger gamers who do not want to be separated and placed on a team with the older gamers. The other team consists of Devon, Flash, and Wizard. On one side, the older gamers whisper their strategies. On the opposite side Luc speaks with patience in directing his team's actions. They play with intense concentration and are unusually quiet. John questions where something is and Trey points it out on John's screen. When he resumes play, Trey asks Luc for help, but Luc encourages him to continue his own play noting, "You can finish it. Just be ready to run." Trey stands his ground in the game as directed. Luc could have taken the kill from Trey and collected the credits. However, he chose to encourage Trey how to perform in the game. Exchanges such as this hint at the possibility that Luc has purposes beyond helping these young men improve their gaming skills. He may be teaching them the underlying message, "Stand your ground, use your head, and when possible finish what you start."

The first game ends quickly with the younger boys and Luc surrendering to the other team. The teams are not well balanced in skill and knowledge. John suggests that they set up a 5 on 5 game and invite virtual players. He asks if the store instructor can play on their team against the experienced gamers' team. Having the option of inviting virtual players allows John to

confront his hopelessness of playing against a team that has more skill. It presents an empowering option for him as well. Despite this, Luc suggests that they keep the teams configured as they are, and tells his teammates, Trey and John, “I have a plan.”

As the second game ensues again there is little talk on either side. When the game ends the older gamers say nothing. They sit quietly and stare at their screens while ignoring everyone in their surroundings. Trey calls out my name and announces excitedly, “We won! We beat ‘em!” The usual boasting and bantering do not take place. The older gamers lost to Luc and two “noobs.” In an interview, Luc described a similar instance during a *League of Legends* tournament that was held at the software store. Luc and two of the younger gamers, Julius and John, teamed against Devon, Rick, and Wizard. Luc recalled that

The game lasted about 45 minutes on the small map [the 3 on 3 game map is smaller than the 5 on 5 map], which is a pretty long time. We were working well together. We were out strategizing them, like doing things they weren’t used to. I was helping them [Julius and John] coordinate what they needed to do. But then we still ended up losing cause the skill wasn’t there at a point; like how quickly to do an action that had to be done. But after that match, Devon and Wizard didn’t say much cause they knew we were doing very well against them... considering Julius was playing with some guy [game champion] he never played with. ...And it was good for our guys cause John didn’t want to play at first. He was like, ‘Why I gotta play them?’ And I was like, ‘Well, they won the last game. We gotta play them. It’s a tournament. That’s how it works.’

In such a situation the gamers have an opportunity to experience a mix of factors that enable their desired outcomes. The combined enlistment of new game strategies, effective leadership, and cooperative effort create possibilities of success, even in the face of daunting odds. For the younger gamers, such experiences encourage perseverance; for older gamers, the challenge becomes more enticing as certainty of success against novice gamers is threatened. Luc described a situation where experienced gamers were rendered silent instead of their usual habit of voicing critical views and self-congratulations. Experiences such as these reinforce notions of what is required to succeed in the game and high competency levels are attained through practice, strategic thinking, cooperation, and perseverance.

6.3 Sanctions and Criticisms Verses Approval and Praise

At this session there are eight gamers in attendance. As they begin to configure the teams, some disagreement occurs about who should be on what team. Luc interjects and says, “What did we talk about before?” During an interview, Luc explained the gamers had discussed and agreed they would configure teams based on even distribution of abilities rather than by friendship groups. The younger boys wanted to be on the same team, and the older boys wanted to be on the same team. With this reminder, the gamers agree to a configuration of teams with Luc, Wizard, Ruben, Trey, and the store instructor on the red team. The blue team consists of Biggie, Rick, Flash, Julius, and Harry. While they wait for the game to load Trey notices Luc’s game champion has a difference appearance.

Trey: Hey Luc, does your guy have new skins [game champion costume]?

Luc: No, the game designers changed the way he looks.

Trey: Oh, that's filthy [very nice].

Some of the gamers (particularly the younger ones) place value on changing the appearance of game champions to make them look more menacing. Gamers can change the appearance of the champions by purchasing "skins" for them with Riot Points (RPs). These points are earned through extensive game play, or they are purchased using real money. Some of the gamers value skins because they make intimidating impressions on their opponents, or because they are "cool."

Luc's team agrees to type their battle plans in the chat box so the opposing team does not hear them. They begin to play the game and so do the commands, taunting, joking, and boasting. Members of both teams talk among themselves and to gamers on the opposing team. Names are marked with an 'R' for the Red team members and 'B' for Blue team members. For example, one of these exchanges involves five players, three from the Red team and two from the Blue team:

(R) Ruben: [to Biggie on the opposing team] We got you on lockdown.

(B) Flash: Come out of the closet. Want me to tell you who I am? Wizard, I don't think that flash was necessary.

(R) Wizard: Shut up! I'll beast you again.

(B) Flash: I got you Biggie.

(R) Wizard: Yeah! Die mother. Beast on you.

(B) Julius: Harry! I mean somebody help!

(R) Trey: Can you help me up here?

(R) Ruben: Yeah!

(R) Trey: Ruben! Ruben! Ruben!

(R) Ruben: I'm trying!

When called upon for assistance, one or more teammates are expected to come to the aid of the other. Gamers who consistently fail to heed the calls of their teammates are often publicly chastised, while those who are consistent in their support are praised. Courage and bravery within the game also are expected among these players. This exchange among the Blue team illustrates these points:

(B) Flash: Why did you guys back up? You could have killed him.

(B) Julius: Oh – Who did that?! Wizard! You little – [Wizard and Rick laugh].

(B) Flash: Fight 'em, Harry. Julius, protect the tower man. You have enough health to go forward.

(B) Julius: Sorry. [Julius disregards Flash's command and teleports himself back to the safety of his home base.]

(B) Flash: [shouts] Look what Julius did!

Julius' retreat is not perceived as an act of rebellion against the commands of the older player to protect his individual autonomy. Instead, Flash interprets his retreat as failing to meet a group expectation. Julius is perceived as having the ability to push forward and further the cause

of his team. When he fails to meet the challenge within an acceptable range of risk, Flash assumes everyone in the group will agree with his criticism of Julius when he says, incredulously, “Look what Julius did!”

Some of the younger gamers are now asserting themselves more than they did in the first few weeks of the class held at the Microsoft store. Their mimicking the older gamers is becoming more prevalent, as is evident in this dialogue:

(R) Ruben: Wizard, go middle.

(R) Wizard: Why?

(R) Ruben: Cause I’m leaving to go bottom.

(B) Julius: Harry, want to play some peek-a-boo? Get ‘em now!

(B) Harry: You guys, stop talking out loud! Type it! [Harry is 11 years old and is usually quiet and compliant. He admonishes his teammates, including the older experienced players.]

(B) Wizard: Julius, why you so scared?

(B) Julius: [to the store instructor] Can you help me a little?

(R) Ruben: Luc! You got juked [out smarted]!

(B) Biggie: Harry! What are you doing?!

(B) Harry: [He gets up from his chair and looks Biggie squarely in the face.] HEY!!

(R) Wizard: [to Harry] Booy, you can’t do nothing to me.

(B) Flash: He coulda killed you, Wizard. Julius, where you at?

(R) Ruben: Flash has low mana [resource needed by champions to use their abilities].

Kill 'em!

(B) Julius: I'm coming as fast as I can.

(R) Trey: Bout time you made it, Julius.

Ruben tells the more experienced Wizard where to position his champion. Harry demands his teammates type strategies rather than say them aloud for the opposing team to hear. He also defies Biggie who criticizes his actions in the game. Trey criticizes Julius who is on the opposing team for his absence during a major battle. Julius' tepid performance is criticized by the group as a whole, again suggesting an expectation of showing boldness and courage in the game.

Gamers sometimes observe what their opponents do in the game and want to emulate actions that they see are effective. They investigate for themselves how to emulate actions, or, they ask instructors or other gamers. An illustration of this learning through shared knowledge and observation occurs in the following exchange between Flash and Ruben, who are on opposing sides:

(R) Ruben: [to Flash] Good job.

(B) Flash: Ruben, look what I got. My guy is glowing.

(R) Ruben: How'd you do that? A potion [magic brew purchased from the game shop]?

(R) Trey: He thought he was gon get away. Freedooooom! [He raises his arms in the air as if in praise of a deity and laughs.]

(R) Ruben: I just got a triple-kill. I just got a triple-kill. I just got a triple-kill.

Researcher: Does that mean you just killed three of the other team?

(R) Ruben: Yeah! He got a pentakill once. [He points to Flash on the opposing team.] He killed five guys at one time.

Ruben praises Flash and asks questions about his game knowledge even as they play against each other. He is willing to share the spotlight of his triple kill with Flash who Ruben sees as performing an even greater feat to which he aspires to attain.

As Ruben experiences more success and gains confidence in the game his taunting and bravado increase. He responds rather nonchalantly to Biggie's challenge to, "Come on! Meet me by my tower," with a simple, but confident, "Okay!" They meet up and battle against each other. Ruben comments on his effective playing with, "Get beasted on, Boy! Get bested on Boy! Get beasted on!" After Ruben kills Biggie's champion, the conversation unfolds thusly:

(R) Ruben: You just new! [What the older gamers say to the younger gamers regularly.]

(B) Biggie: Okay, but you can't beat me.

(R) Ruben: I'll smack 'em anytime. Come on! Meet me one-on-one [again].

(B) Biggie: No.

(R) Ruben: Why! You think you gon get smacked?

Ruben is 11 and Biggie is 19 years old. Transcending assumptions of age differentials that generally determine power dynamics, Ruben's gaming skills place him in a position of power in this exchange. Over time, Ruben has learned how to increase the power of his champion to defeat opponents, even older, more experienced ones such as Biggie.

There are several ways gamers can enhance the performance potential of their champions. One of these is accumulating gold through making kills, spending time playing the game, and by acquiring "buffs" [powers attained by slaying dragons and monsters] that are in the jungle of the battlefield map. Ruben is often preoccupied with accumulating more gold and power for his champion. This interferes with him meeting expected obligations to his teammates to assist in carrying out team strategies. The game ends and the group immediately turn to watch the two minute recap on the large wall screen. The gamers discuss how some of them performed in the game; Ruben is a target for criticism:

(B) Julius: I was good support. Look at what I bought. [He points to the large screen.]

(R) Luc: What were you doing roaming around the bush, Ruben?

(R) Ruben: I juked [out-smarted] you guys.

(B) Harry: Ruben, remember when you jumped me?

(R) Wizard: We want to trade Ruben for Julius. He didn't support the team.

(R) Ruben: Okay. I'll move over there.

Ruben failed to heed the call of his teammates to execute collective action. Julius, who is heavily criticized for his performance by both his teammates and some of his opponents, is

traded for Ruben when the teams are reconfigured. Although Ruben amassed a great deal of gold and could buy powers for his champion that enabled him to defeat Biggie in the previous game, he is considered more of a causality than an asset, which leads to rejection by his teammates – at least temporarily. The gamers give Ruben another opportunity to correct his priorities in future games.

In the next game Ruben demonstrates his understanding and nascent acceptance of the norm of team accountability. The blue team consists of Ruben, Harry, Biggie, Flash, and Rick. With the exception of Harry, everyone is bilingual, Spanish and English speaking. The red team consists of Luc, Wizard, Trey, Julius, and the store gaming instructor.

The instructor explains and demonstrates Dominion, an alternative version to the *Classic* edition of *League of Legends*. He tells the gamers that, “Sometimes you might get bored with playing the same game all the time so it’s good to know how to play this other version.” They vote on what customized version of the game they want to play. Flash asks the instructor to access the rules on the Internet. Rick knows the rules and can review them for the group. The instructor encourages him to do so and Rick stands up and calls for the group’s attention. “Listen up” he announces. For a few minutes, 16 year-old Rick acts as the gaming instructor for the group. He confidently provides a well-articulated overview of the objective of the game and the different rules players are to follow. Then he answers individual questions posed to him. When Rick sits down, Flash explains some of the points Julius missed, and they begin to play a customized version of the digital game. Biggie and Ruben were previously on opposing teams and challengers to each other. Now that they are on the same team, they begin to play with a demonstrative camaraderie:

(B) Ruben: I got you Biggie.

(B) Biggie: Come on, Bro. Keep close to me.

(R) Julius: Wizard ain't lettin' it happen! Wizard ain't lettin' it happen. We're winning right now. Come on big boy! Come on big boy! I'm takin' it.

(R) Wizard: Back up!

(R) Julius: Yeahhh. Now I have something I can use awesomely, to my awesomely advantage. Get 'em! Get 'em! You guys going beast now! I got lucky cause I got the character I like.

Julius expresses a sense of empowerment in the game that appears to come from at least two sources. First, his champion in the game is one he knows how to equip and control well. Second, one of his teammates, Wizard, has built up the power of his champion and skillfully uses it in game battle situations. Julius and other team members fight alongside Wizard and benefit from his competence. It is a kind of empowerment by association. Communication between the gamers often illustrates their interdependence and appreciation of each other as illustrated above, and in this exchange.

(B) Ruben: Hey, group up for a heal!

(R) Wizard: Yeah guys. [grinning] I just want to say, hey.

(B) Ruben: Got you Harry.

(R) Julius: No you don't. You don't have him at all. I like how much dead time you get.

(B) Ruben: Hey Flash, you got to start warning, Bro.

In the previous game Ruben was criticized for acting too individually and failing to cooperate with the group. In this game he projects a similar criticism toward an older, more experienced player. Ruben also asserts leadership as he emulates what he has seen and heard from the older gamers. Luc sometimes explicitly states that there is an expectation for the older gamers to be models for the younger gamers. At times the older gamers attempt to rise to this expectation, as occurs in this dialogue:

(B) Flash: Hey, someone go through this side and someone go through that side.

(B) Biggie: [He says something in Spanish and he and Ruben laugh.] Trey, you're not supposed to go up that way.

(R) Trey: You guys have been going that way the whole time.

(B) Flash: [to Rick] You're older. You're not supposed to cheat like these guys [the younger gamers].

(B) Biggie: Rick has been cheating the whole time. I really don't know how to play this [version of the game].

(B) Julius: Bad Mexican. Bad Mexican. Bad Mexican. [Rick is Mexican American.]

(R) Wizard: Bad Mexican. Bad Mexican. [laughs]

(B) Biggie: Oh my gosh! That took a chunk of my health.

Luc: Jump on him! Jump on him! Jump on him. Too late. It's all up to you two [Ruben and Harry]!

Flash expresses the idea that there is an expectation for the older gamers to set an example of conduct for the younger gamers. They tease each other playfully when they do not meet the expectation, but the intent is there, and in future games they will make an effort to fulfill it.

Luc's team loses and again the group reviews the last two minutes of the game displayed on the large screen and comment on what they see. They review the numbers of kills, kill assists, accumulations of gold, and boast about their individual numbers. Interwoven in the conversation is teasing and taunting.

(B) Flash: You guys cheated. [Most of them laugh at this.]

(R) Wizard: Why did you save me? I wanted to die.

(R) Trey: Watch! [laughing] Look at that!

(B) Biggie: None of your items gave you health.

The after game review and discussions provide a forum for boasting and taunting as well as for reflection of game performance. Discussions include pointing out what actions worked well and what did not. Travel time back to the Ridgeway community also is used for rich debriefing about what happened in the games played that evening. Information is shared for improving performance in future games.

6.4 Establishing Norms and Values

Biggie is sitting in the gaming class area in the rear of the store and Harry and Luc ask him to help set up the tables for the gaming class. “Why should I when I got you guys,” he answers with a grin. Flash and Rick sit next to each other. They goad one of the Microsoft store employees who assists the gaming instructor. Flash says, “You need to play with us so we can smack you.” Rick agrees and adds, “Yeah, we need to see your stats to see if you’re any good.” The store employee laughs and tells them he might play a game with them. When Ruben and Trey hear this, Ruben appropriates the invitation by stating, “Hey, play on our team. You play support.” Trey agrees but asks the employee, “Are you any good at support?”

The support role in the game requires a player to heal and shield his teammates from attack. In a previous class, after the instructor explained the support role he asked for volunteers to play the part in a game. No one willingly took on the role. Finally, Wizard and John were persuaded to play it. The support role holds little glory since gamers are not equipped well to make kills against their opponents. Trey asks the store assistant several questions about his game playing – “How do I know what level I’m at? How can I get more AP [ability power] with this guy? What about more AD [attack damage]? Should I get this rune next, or this one?” The assistant signals that the instructor is beginning his presentation. Trey continues with his barrage of questions. Flash plays with his cell phone. Rick and Wizard point to their computer screens while reviewing their stat pages. Harry, Flash, and Luc appear to be the only ones listening to the instructor. Many group members value the gaming information, but on a “need-to-know” basis, such as while playing in the game or when they specifically ask for it.

Rick persists with the invitation to the assistant to play with the group by challenging him with, “I thought you didn’t want to play cause you’re scared you’d get smacked.” Julius echoes this sentiment with, “You afraid you’ll get smacked?” The store assistant stops what he is doing and thinks for a moment. Some of the other gamers wait for his response in a heavy silence. The assistant finally responds, “Okay, I’ll play,” and everyone laughs at his acceptance. Presenting and accepting challenges are valued by the group. The assistant met the challenge by accepting it. The teams are configured so that on the blue team is composed of Biggie, Rick, Wizard, Flash, and Julius. Everyone on this team is a veteran gamer except Julius. On the red team is the store assistant, Luc, Ruben, Harry, and Trey. The younger friendship -trio is together on the same team again. Another young gamer, John, has not attended the last three gaming classes. He is quiet, compliant, and on the periphery of the tightly knit friendship-trio of the younger gamers. Luc coaches the young trio as he plays in the game with them. With growing knowledge and skills in the game, Ruben is becoming more resistant to Luc’s advice, as exemplified in this exchange:

(R) Luc: Ruben, you got to be smart about that. Okay? Run! Run, don’t face him. No, go back man.

(R) Ruben: It’s cool. I got this.

(R) Luc: Please listen to me.

(B) Biggie: Get ‘em! Get ‘em!

(R) Ruben: [disappointedly] Why did you – Wow, Luc. Wow.

(R) Luc: Guys, come down from the top and get [him]. He's hiding in the bush. [to Ruben] Why are you criticizing me? I'm not doing anything wrong. Now I know why people get mad at you when you play.

Luc did not support Ruben in his game action after he told him to retreat. Ruben's champion died and Ruben expressed disappointment in Luc. As the action continues tensions between Luc and Ruben mount.

(B) Wizard: You said you want me to help! That's what I'm frigging doing.

(B) Flash: Jungle instead.

(B) Wizard: I'm helping Rick.

(R) Luc: Harry, read that. Okay? Heal and go back to town, Puppy [Ruben]. Just be smart about it. Go bottom, Ruben. Go bottom. Ruben, I said go bottom. I didn't say I was going to help you.

(R) Ruben: [frustrated] I typed, "Wait!"

(R) Luc: [to Trey] Get top. Don't forget, top. Okay? That's still your lane.

(R) Trey: [after the action settles down] Man, that was chaos.

(B) Julius: Man, why you getting so mad?

(R) Trey: I said chaos. I'm not getting mad.

(R) Luc: Back up! Back up, Puppy [Ruben]! ...Harry, Rick is in the bush. Right above us. Yep, there he is.

Despite the tensions, Luc believes Ruben is making progress in developing a sense of community and cooperation as he establishes closer relationships with the group members. But he still has “a ways to go.”

As the action in the current game continues, the norm of one-on-one challenge is exemplified a few times in this exchange:

(R) Harry: Okay, Julius. Come on.

(B) Julius: What?

(R) Harry: COME ON!

(B) Julius: I see you. Yep, I can buy some mana. I should get clarity. Oh – that’s why you’re so hard to kill.

(R) Ruben: I’ll get you, boy!

(B) Julius: You didn’t get any kills on me. I got kills on you, Ruben.

(R) Ruben: You never killed me.

(B) Julius: Yes I did. I killed you.

(B) Wizard: [half grinning] Shut up. You fricken – Shut up. You got stacks? What the hell you doin’ Julius?

(B) Julius: I don’t have it, or I’d use it.

(B) Wizard: Know what. Shut up and just play. Damn noobs. [Biggie makes a kill] Fricken kill-stealer. [half-smiling]

(B) Biggie: I am not. I got my stacks though [He makes another kill].

(B) Wizard: Another kill-steal!

(B) Biggie: He was in the bush.

(B) Rick: MIA! They're missing! MIA

(B) Wizard: Oh gosh! That was a huge fail. Damn it. Why did you push me away, Luc?
Why didn't you guys [teammates] get him?

(B) Biggie: Lookit. [He laughs and points at Julius' screen.]

(B) Wizard: He got – [He looks at Julius' screen and laughs.]

(B) Julius: What you laughing at, Harry!? Unfair. Unfair. Unfair.

(B) Wizard: Harry, me and you, one-on-one, now.

(B) Rick: [to Wizard] He smacked you 3 on 1.

(B) Flash: You did no damage Biggie.

(B) Biggie: I don't do damage.

(B) Flash: What are your abilities? [Flash tells members of the other team that they should kill Biggie.] Kill 'em! Kill'em! I'm not going to help him. [Harry kills Biggie].

Good Job, Harry!

The one-on-one challenges are a means for gamers to show others their skill and knowledge in relation to each other. Julius and Ruben debate past victories over each other.

Wizard challenges novice Harry in an attempt to recapture his perceived position as a superior player. Rick's comment, "He smacked you 3 on 1" may be construed as a veiled challenge to Wizard, that "You cannot let Harry get away with his victory against you."

The game ends with the defeat of Luc, the store assistant and the young friendship-trio. In reviewing the last two minutes of game play, Biggie is the target of most criticism.

Rick: Biggie got rapped right there. [most laugh]

Luc: Let's switch up the teams to make it more even.

Rick: I'll take Harry. He's the best player [of the noobs].

Before the next game, the gamers take a break. While they eat their snacks, Rick continues to criticize Biggie's game playing.

Rick: [to Biggie] Your style of play is bad, man.

Biggie: But I win.

Rick: That's cause you're not playing against anybody good. You play noobs.

When Julius sits back down at his computer, he uses a profanity and some of the gamers remind him of an agreement.

Julius: S --!

Flash: Oh, you got to pay the \$10 fine for cursing.

Julius: F --! I might as well curse the rest of the night if I got to pay the fine anyway.

Flash: No it's every time you curse. Now you owe \$20.

Julius: No. It's every day I curse.

Biggie: No. Remember that paper you signed! Every time you curse.

The gamers sometimes act as stewards of their own community by holding members accountable to group expectations. They signed an agreement with Luc for behavioral expectations in the Microsoft store and they mostly honor the agreement. They attempt to bring Julius back into the fold with their reminders.

The teams are reconfigured for the second game. The red team is composed of the store assistant, Luc, Rick, Harry, and Ruben. On the blue side there is Biggie, Flash, Wizard, Trey, and Julius. As the game begins, the store instructor engages in the same kind of bantering as the gamers he instructs when he taunts, "Get ready to get smacked." Julius curses again and looks over at Luc as the game talk begins.

Julius: Hey, I can talk that way now.

Luc: No you can't. I told you that.

(R) Rick: Hey Luc. Can you tell him [Ruben] to back up cause he won't listen to us.

(R) Luc: I've been trying.

(R) Ruben: I'm the BOSS! Trey, you want to go one-on-one with me? Harry, stop auto attacking [champion's basic attack when right-clicking their computer mouse].

(B) Wizard: [to Julius] I told you to go in there.

(B) Julius: I tried.

(B) Wizard: No you didn't.

(B) Julius: I don't like this guy as a teammate.

(B) Biggie: Run Trey, run! Don't stop!

(B) Julius: [to Wizard] You came and kill-stealed that.

During the last game, Wizard accused his teammates of "kill-stealing." Julius accuses Wizard of the same offense during this game.

(B) Flash: Biggie, why didn't you come back when we all died?

(B) Biggie: Because I was bored. What the hell is Wizard building [for his champion]. I don't know why Wizard picked Shen [game champion]. He's no good.

Rick laughs out loud as he keeps his eyes on his screen. Ruben is sitting next to him and almost on cue, he too, laughs out loud.

(B) Julius: Harry always goes for the kill.

(B) Biggie: Jump on him, Trey. I can't go in there. He's about to use his ulti.

There is much shouting of commands between the gamers. Ruben kills Biggie and begins to boast.

(R) Ruben: Who da BOSS!?! Yeah!

(B) Biggie: Not you.

(R) Rick: Biggie is just a noob. So!

(R) Ruben: Where you going, Fiddlesticks [Julius' game champion]?

(R) Rick: Run, Fiddlesticks!

(B) Julius: But I got none of my stuff. I got no – [He stops when he looks up at Biggie.]

(B) Biggie: [eye contact with Julius] Just shut up.

Biggie found Julius' excuses unacceptable. His look and tone change from playfulness to momentary disdain. Julius stopped mid-sentence as if he recognized his behavior is unacceptable whining.

(B) Julius: Ruben, just because you're [doing] good in this game doesn't mean you're filthy [very good]. F -- it. Just F -- it. Man, this is not my game.

(B) Flash: [He turns from his computer screen to face the backs of the other team.] You guys got to admit this isn't fair! Look at who I'm playing with! [He motions toward his teammates.]

(R) Luc: How is it not fair?

(B) Julius: [defensively] I'm used to going middle [of the game map].

(B) Flash: See, it would have been [fair] if we had taken Harry instead of Trey.

In this game Harry is identified as the stronger player among the newer gamers. His older brother, Julius, makes excuses for his own performance. Harry's recognition as a stronger player may in part provoke Julius' behavior. Flash expresses concern about balance between the teams,

a value previously expressed by Luc but was not a high priority among the gamers. They were content with unbalanced team configurations of new players on one team and experienced players on the other. As the value of equalized ability distribution becomes an accepted norm, and the new players become more skilled, there is a heightened awareness of each gamer's proficiency that is considered in forming teams. When the game ends, Flash immediately announces, "Switch up teams." In the past, it was Luc who initiated reconfiguration of imbalanced teams. Trey is the first to volunteer to move back to his original team. Having been identified as the weakest link on Flash's team may have provoked this action.

Ruben trades places with Trey to be on Flash's team. The game is customized and Julius' favorite champion is not available to him. He must choose a different champion and he solicits information from others who might help him. He begins with Biggie.

(B) Julius: Hey, who is the fastest person?

(B) Biggie: I don't know. Just pick one.

(B) Julius: Who should I get? Who!? Who? Who? [Julius chooses his champion without Biggie's input.] Man, why did I get him?

(R) Luc: Hey Rick, me and Trey are defenders. Should I leave the base to defend?

(R) Rick: You want to roam around?

(R) Luc: I don't know. Whatever you guys want.

(R) Rick: Why you guys so boring?

(B) Julius: Who us? I don't know.

(R) Rick: Just get the boxes down all over the place til' you get to level 2. Then run.

Rick plays the role of expert even for Luc who turns to him for advice. The boundaries of age, supervisor, and teacher are blurred within this community of gamers. In the meantime, Flash is busy typing notes in the chat box. One note says, "BITCHHH." The gamers are fined \$10 for cursing aloud but some are taking initiative in using non-verbal communication to circumvent this rule.

6.5 Mentoring and Modeling

As the store instructor and his assistant prepare for the class the gamers are at different display stations throughout the store. Biggie, Wizard, and Flash are at a large computer monitor playing a simulation football game. Julius and Harry are at a game where they are simulating combat between each other. Ruben asks the instructor if Rick "beat" him playing *League of Legends*.

Instructor: Yeah, he did.

Ruben: I invited you to play a few days ago. Why didn't you accept?

Instructor: My car was in the shop.

Ruben: What? You were in the shop?

Instructor: No, I was getting my car fixed so that's how I probably missed your game invitation.

Ruben: Oh. Hey Savanna, look! I'm at level 30. I'm not a noob anymore.

I congratulate Ruben on his success. Level 30 is the highest a gamer can accomplish. After reaching this level, gamers compete against others with similar performance skills to ascend in a hierarchical ranking system. Ruben's interest in playing the store instructor may be motivated by a desire to improve his own gaming skills and rank by playing against someone more skilled. He also may want to emulate Rick by defeating the instructor of the class.

Before beginning the mini lesson, the instructor asks the group if anyone had a chance to try a new champion since their last meeting. Rick, Ruben, and Harry name the champion each tried. The instructor offers to help Harry with his selected champion since he had recently tried the same champion himself. Ruben, Biggie, and Flash are distracted by their computer screens, and they chat with each other. The other gamers appear to be giving the instructor their attention out of a politeness more than genuine interest.

The instructor questions the group by asking, "Are any of you reading to learn [more about] Xsplit? What I showed you last week." Luc says, "Yeah, I am." No one else answers. Then the instructor reviews and demonstrates how to access extreme video for game tutorials. Julius calls Ruben by his *League of Legends* user name, "Puppy." As he nods his head toward his computer screen he tells Ruben, "Read the message!" He has written something in the game chat box that makes Ruben laugh. Luc tells them, "Come on guys," and most of the younger gamers begin to pay attention. The chat box is a means of communicating about game strategy and planning, as well as sending jokes, taunts, and boasts.

The gamers are inspecting their profile pages and comparing statistics as is their habit at the beginning of a class session. Julius is using profanity regularly today. Finally, Luc asks,

“What is going on with you today?” Julius denies there is a problem. At that moment Ruben calls out, “Luc, I’m not a noob anymore.” They begin to set up their game by inviting each other in:

Trey: Hey, kick that one guy out.

Luc: Who?

Trey: Oh never mind.

Luc: Is everybody in?

Harry: I’m not.

Luc: Hey, what’s wrong guy?

Throughout their time at the Microsoft store the gamers prefer playing against each other. They rarely invite virtual players on the Internet. Jesus, who is about 10 years old, came with the gamers today. He occasionally plays the digital game at the community center, but his knowledge and skills are very limited. Luc sits close to Jesus throughout the session and works almost exclusively with him. This is how Luc introduced the game to all of the “noobs.” He sits with them and guides their moves in the game, generally explaining his rationale when time permits. Jesus will play against gamers who are well beyond his skill. He meets the challenge with confidence, perhaps looking ahead, and believing that he can reach their level with time, practice, and Luc’s close guidance.

The teams are configured so the red team is Rick, Flash, Harry, Julius, and Jesus, with Luc. On the blue team are Biggie, Wizard, Trey, Ruben, and John (who has returned after being absent for the last few weeks). The game ends quickly with the defeat of Biggie’s team. Luc

advises Biggie to position himself as a leader on his team, suggesting, “You need to coach your team members and watch the back door. [This means champions attack the opponent’s tower or nexus without the support of their minions in front of them to take the hits.] Biggie responds, with annoyance, “Oh yeah. I forgot I wasn’t playing with my regular team.” Luc routinely expects the more experienced gamers to coach the younger, less experienced ones. Sometimes the more experienced gamers assume a leadership role on their own volition. However, Luc models this function as he coaches each of them. Some gamers emulate this coaching model without being told. Biggie had to be reminded of this community norm.

Rosa is the only girl who occasionally attended the gaming class. She takes Jesus’ place on the red team and Luc sits nearby to guide her actions. When the game play begins again, Luc expands his coaching to other gamers based on what he sees happening in the game. He tells them, “You guys are too far back. You’re not gaining any experience that far back.” Wizard counters this advice by telling a player to “Back up! Back Up! I said back up, man.”

During an interview, Ruben claimed that he only asked instructors for advice but now he asks Wizard a question about an item to buy in the game. Later, Ruben says something to Biggie in Spanish. They are planning a strategy move and use their bilingualism to their advantage.

(B) Ruben: Come on, help me get the kill.

Luc: You guys are trying to pick on Rosa. It’s not going to happen.

Inexperienced players are often targeted for easy kills that enable players to accrue game points (gold) faster. Both experienced and less experienced gamers freely use the label “noob” toward each other. For example,

Luc: [to both teams] I don't hear you guys talking to each other. Talk to your team.

(B) Biggie: I'm not talking to these noobs.

(R) Store Instructor: That's how you lose.

(B) Biggie: [to computer screen] Leave!

Luc: It's two against one, guys. Why'd you both run?

(R) Flash: Wizard, did you see the damage it did?

(B) Wizard: Yeah! ... [to John and Trey] What are you guys doing? Defend that center lane! Common sense!

(B) Biggie: How can you guys not kill Tryndamere?

(B) Wizard: How'd you get killed, Ruben? You should have teleported back to town!

(R) Flash: [laughs out loud]

(R) Rick: [to his teammate, Harry] Wow! You messed up my Jungle route, Bro.

Julius gets a kill and Rick explains to Luc the team effort that went into it:

(R) Rick: I speared, he stunned, and then he killed him. What are you doing, Harry?

Whatever, do what you want [Rick kills Wizard's champion].

(B) Wizard: You guys! Why didn't you help me? You just stood there and watched me get killed!

(R) Julius: I see you, noob. Ah, what the F --! No one's helping me.

(R) Flash: [to Rick] If I buy the second scepter, that will slow them too, huh?

(R) Rick: Uhhuh. Yo –Why would you kill him, Bro? That was my kill. That’s not cool, y’all. Why would you put a ward [helps gamers see invisible items] there, Harry?

The game ends with the defeat of the blue team. Wizard, blue team member, immediately demands a change when he says, ” Switch up the teams! We shouldn’t have all the little kids.” There was an equitable distribution of young, newer players on each side. Luc was coaching the newest and most inexperienced player, Rosa, who was not on Wizard’s team. The teams are reconfigured so that the red team includes Rick, Wizard, Julius, John, and Rosa along with Luc as her coach. On the blue team there are Biggie, Flash, Ruben, Trey, and Harry. The next game begins, accompanied by much talk that hints at the values and norms of the community:

(B) Flash: Rick, where did you get that skin?

(R) Rick: I’ve had that skin a long time. I have four skins.

(B) Harry: I hate my partner [Biggie]. He keeps on killing my creeps [minions].

Harry gets gang attacked by opponents but does not die.

(B) Harry: I’m so filthy [very good], guy; I survived that.

(R) Wizard: [with a half grin] Biggie! You big bully. [His teammate, Julius says something.] Shut up, you chicken leg mother –

Rick and Flash, like many of the younger gamers, value skins that dress up their game champions and are meant to impress opponents. Harry expresses a positive self-image based on his gaming skills. As Wizard plays, he often smiles and grins silently at his computer screen. At

times he shouts out taunts and teasing remarks, but continues smiling, indicating pleasure in the processes of gaming and the talk that goes with it.

Luc: [to Ruben] Get your shield on.

(B) Ruben: I'm still not getting my shield on.

Luc: That's your choice.

(B) Trey: I beasted on Wizard.

(B) Biggie: This is where they all jumped me. You got me. Wizard, you didn't even do anything. It was all Rick.

(B) Flash: Harry doesn't even help out.

(B) Biggie: That's what I'm saying.

(B) Ruben: He just goes for the kills.

Gamers are free to exercise their individual autonomy in this community. However, in past gaming sessions Ruben was often criticized for failing to support team efforts. Now he follows the example of the older gamers who criticize Harry for a similar kind of self-absorbed behavior. Ironically, two weeks before Harry was praised as one of the better newer players. Behavior in a particular gaming session is how one is accessed, critiqued, and/or praised. The status of gamers is fluid and dynamic. Ruben and Harry move in and out of compliance. Fluidity of status assists in bringing rogue members back into compliance with group norms. When the game ends the gamers critique each other as in this exchange,

(R) Rick: I just tried to keep my team away from me cause nobody helped me. See – well that guy was the only one trying to help me.

(R) Wizard: Biggie was just feeding off Rosa cause she's new.

(B) Biggie: I was just playing the game.

Rick highlights the expectation of team accountability and collective action. The criticism of Biggie implies the expectation for following a group norm of taking risks. He chose the easy target that was not at the same level of challenge others in the game pursued. The criticism diminishes Biggie's performance in the game.

6.6 Community Values Personified

This is the last day the class is held at the Microsoft store. The store instructor shows a video tutorial of the *League of Legends*. The younger gamers watch intently, except for Julius who interacts with his computer screen. Trey comments, "This [video] is filthy," and Ruben agrees. Ruben calls my name and tells me that he won his rank game. I admit that I do not know what that is and he explains, "It's a harder game than the regular game." The group decides to play a game where champions are randomly assigned to each gamer. They do not have the freedom and security of playing with champions of their own choosing. The gamers decide on the team configurations with the red team including Luc, Biggie, Ruben, Trey, and Harry. The blue team is comprised of Rick, Flash, Wizard, Julius, and John.

Group values and norms previously established continue during this session. These include challenging others and accepting challenges; exercising individual autonomy; taking risks; learning from others; coaching and communicating knowledge with others; accountability

to one's team; abiding by group norms; collective action; teasing and taunting; garnering individual recognition, defending one's image; out-strategizing one's opponent; and taking pleasure in the gaming processes. Throughout their dialogues the gamers epitomize the continuity of these norms. For example,

(B) Rick: [smiling] I don't want to play on Biggie's team. Oh – I'll play on his team [teasing].

(R) Trey: I never played with him [a game champion]. Hey, trade me! [defending self-image].

(R) Luc: It'll be alright. Pick your masteries [coaching and risk taking].

(R) Harry: Oh, I never played with this guy. Look who they gave me [risk taking and defending self-image]!

(R) Trey: [to Harry] Just pick those [pointing to screen] for your masteries. That's what I do [coaching and sharing of knowledge].

(B) Rick: I'm not too good with this one in this game. Biggie, it's the same guy I beat you with. But he's not good in this game [risk taking and defending self-image].

(B) Rick: Man – twist of fate. If only you had black. [laughs] We made him spin away cause he's scared [taunting and collective action].

(R) Luc: Get back to the tower guys [coaching]!

(B) Rick: There ain't gonna be no tower. [taunting]

(B) Wizard: [turns to John and shouts] DEFEND [coaching]! [John fidgets uncomfortably.]

The game continues intently without much talk but then, Rick criticizes some actions

Flash takes:

(B) Rick: Why would you [do that]? That's a waste of your flash [game weapon]. He was already dead. Don't do anything stupid [coaching].

(R) Trey: Come on, Puppy [Ruben] [group accountability and collective action].

(B) Rick: Hey! We need to kill Luc. He's like really strong [coaching and collective action].

(B) Wizard: Why aren't you guys defending? Come out [coaching and collective action]!

(R) Luc: No! We don't even have our own – [coaching and collective action].

(B) Rick: Hey Mexican! Mexican! Mexican! [Rick is Mexican and he is calling out to his teammate, Flash, whose user game name is "Mexican Sauce"]. I don't like you, Luc, that's why. Nothing personal. Oh, wow! How did Biggie get a quadra?! Come back [sings]. Baby come back [taunting, teasing, and pleasure in the gaming processes].

(B) Wizard: [to Rick] Shut up [teasing].

(B) Flash: [also to Rick] Shut up [teasing].

(B) Rick: Just kill him. We're going to die anyway. Might as well jump on him [coaching and collective action].

(B) Wizard: [smiling] Shut up, Rick [teasing].

(B) Rick: [sarcastically] I like how you guys initiate and then run [coaching and teasing].

(R) Luc: Stay and fight. ... Alright, good job, guys. Who's that? [coaching, posing challenges, and individual recognition].

(R) Harry: I am! Anybody got heal? I really need it [collective action and group accountability].

(R) Luc: They're grouping up [coaching and collective action].

(R) Harry: I killed three people, Luc. Luc, I killed three people [individual recognition].

(R) Trey: Wow! Look how much health I'm getting [individual recognition].

Rick kills Luc's champion and brings attention to his success.

(B) Rick: [laughs] You like that, Luc? [individual recognition and taunting].

(R) Luc: I thought I could still hit you. That's why I went toward you [defending one's image].

(B) Rick: I had fusion so you couldn't touch me [sharing knowledge and individual recognition].

Luc needs to explain his actions that failed against Rick who takes the opportunity to step into the role of expert, even though Luc is the adult supervisor of the group. Group accountability is illustrated in the following communication exchange, as Harry expresses himself uncharacteristically.

(R) Trey: Harry go [coaching]!

(R) Harry: I'm trying my hardest [group accountability].

(R) Luc: Yeah, get 'em guys [coaching and collective action].

(R) Harry: I'm coming guys! Don't worry! [He sings the next line then laughs.] There will be no worries [teasing, group accountability, and pleasure in the gaming processes].

(R) Trey: You're funny.

(R) Harry: Julius, I'm coming to get you. [sings again] There will be no worries.

Everybody gots to do their best right now [taunting, group accountability, and pleasure in gaming processes].

Harry's humor and singing have not been a form of expression used before. The members of the friendship trio have improved their skills over the past few weeks and they are allowed to play together on the same team without concerns for imbalances of gaming skills. Harry's good mood may in part be due to these conditions. Despite his confidence, when the game ends the trio groans in defeat. Tensions rise as Ruben expresses his disappointment in losing.

(R) Ruben: We coulda won [collective action, defense of self-image].

(R) Luc: No, we couldn't have won after we lost that tower [coaching].

(R) Ruben: No, we coulda won.

(R) Luc: No we couldn't! And it's not Harry's fault [coaching and collective action].

(R) Ruben: I didn't say it was his fault.

(R) Luc: Well you looked right at him and said we coulda won.

Ruben becomes silent and turns to watch the last two minutes of the game action on the large screen on the wall. Luc's role as both the supervisor of the group and intermittent teammate is somewhat akin to the role of the captain of a sports team. He is looked to for leadership, and often influences the dynamics of the team. He is respected for both his knowledge and skill in the game, as well as his leadership. While athletes are expected to follow the direction of their team captain, they do not always do so. The coach of the team holds absolute power. Luc occasionally steps into a role similar to a sports team coach where he exercises absolute power. However, most often, his leadership style is more egalitarian where power is shared with the gamers.

As the gamers watch the recap of the end of the last two minutes of the game, they laugh and recount details of specific battles. Some speak of particular moves they made and suggest what should or should not have been done. They begin to plan the team configuration for the next game and Ruben says that he wants to switch teams. This is unusual since he generally prefers playing on the same team as Trey and Harry. His disappointment in losing the last game suggests that he does indeed hold Harry responsible for their loss. Luc explains to Ruben that he needs to stay on his team since he tends not to listen to his teammates in the game. Wizard chimes in with, "I don't want Ruben. He is too selfish." The opposing team agrees to take Ruben, and Wizard moves to Luc's team. For the next game, the red team is comprised of Luc, Wizard, Biggie, Julius, and Harry, while the blue team is made up of Rick, Flash, Ruben, Trey, and John.

As they prepare for the game, Julius is trying to decide which champion to choose since his favorite is not available to him in the customized version of the game. Luc attempts to help him decide, and Ruben suggests he try a champion he has never played with before.

(R) Julius: No! You would beast on me if I play with him [defending one's image].

Julius asks the store instructor for help.

(R) Julius: [reluctantly] Okay, I'll try him. [risk taking]

As the game ensues, Julius continually complains that he does not know how to use the weapons of his champion. His teammates make demands on him he feels unable to meet.

(R) Wizard: Use your ulti on him [coaching]!

(R) Julius: I don't know how to use it [defending one's image].

(R) Wizard: Just shoot [coaching]!

(B) Rick: Beasted! Beasted! Beasted! Beasted on you [taunting and individual recognition]!

(R) Wizard: Fricken Harry. Fricken Julius [teasing]!

(B) Ruben: Man, you're lucky [taunting].

(B) Biggie: Yeah – right [defending one's image].

(B) Rick: Man, you are so lucky [teasing].

As previously suggested, gaming skills are valued, not luck. When Biggie's team makes a move that is successful in the game, Ruben and Rick taunt Biggie that his success is due to luck, implying it did not involve actual skill. This is another form of taunting and teasing that simultaneously communicates an expectation that skill over luck is the preferred performance in the group.

(B) Ruben: MIA [missing in action]! MIA [group accountability]!

(R) Julius: This thing keeps lagging [defending one's image].

(B) Rick: I'm beasted! I'm beasted! Get out if you don't want this [taunting and individual recognition]!

(R) Julius: On someone who never played this. You just keep hijacking everything [defending one's image].

(B) Rick: [loudly] Get beasted [taunting]!

Shouting the word "beasted" draws the attention of the Microsoft store patrons and employees. Rick uses it as a kind of war cry as he dominates the game. One of the store employees walks to the back and asks the group of gamers, "Beasted? Is that the new word?" John, who is the most quiet and subdued of the gamers, is on the same team as Rick. He generally follows the commands of his teammates and only speaks when necessary. However, in this game he exhibits more comfort when he freely communicates with Trey.

(B) John: [grinning at Trey] This is a good game [pleasure in the gaming process].

(B) Trey: Come on! Get 'em! Get 'em! Get 'em [collective action and risk taking]!

(B) Ruben: Hey Biggie! Meet me by my blue thing [challenging].

(R) Wizard: Not this time boy! Not this time. Where you going? Don't run away [challenging and out-strategizing]!

(B) Rick: [admonishing his teammate] I told you to come over here [coaching and group accountability].

(B) Ruben: I was going and they all jumped me right there [group accountability and protecting self-image].

(R) Harry: I'm the highest level I could be right now [individual recognition].

(R) Wizard: I got six kills. How many kills you have? Yeah, three kills so shut up [individual recognition]!

(R) Biggie: I got you boy! What's up [taunting]?

(B) Rick: [surprise attacks Biggie] Beasted [individual recognition]!

(R) Biggie: I just beasted you so shut up [individual recognition].

(R) Harry: Chicken [makes clucking noises] [taunting and teasing].

(R) Wizard: You just got beasted on, Biggie. [He slaps Biggie on his arm and they both laugh.] You fricken beasting dog [teasing and pleasure in the game process].

(B) Rick: [to his teammate] Ahhh – you suck. Thanks for taking my kill [group norm accountability].

(R) Luc: Do your shield. Do your shield [coaching].

(R) Julius: It doesn't work against them [protecting self-image].

(R) Luc: Harry, do your ulti [coaching].

(R) Harry: I don't have it [group accountability].

(R) Julius: [Stretches over and looks at Harry's screen.] Yep, he doesn't have it [group accountability].

The performance of the gamers is more public in this context since gamers can look at the screens of other players. Deficiencies and competencies are more transparent.

(R) Harry: Hey come on! Wizard! Wizard [collective action]!

(R) Wizard: Let's go. [To his opponent.] I'll finish you off right now [challenging].

Wizard's champion dies in the battle. Turning to his teammate, Julius, he questions him about his game moves.

(R) Wizard: Why would you switch him, man? You got me dead! Why would you switch him [group accountability, protecting self-image]?

(R) Julius: [to store instructor] I just figure it's best to get the recommended items to buy when you don't know the character [protecting self-image].

(R) Wizard: [to Biggie] I told you to leave [coaching].

(R) Biggie: You tell me that after I die [protecting self-image].

(R) Wizard: Get off me, Flash! You don't want this. What! What! What! Beast mo [challenging]!

(R) Biggie: Jax [game champion] is coming. Jax [is] coming [collective action and individual recognition].

(R) Julius: [to Harry] Come with me [coaching and group accountability].

(R) Harry: No [individual autonomy].

(R) Julius: Trust me, I know what I'm doing [group accountability and collective action].

Harry follows Julius and his plan does not work. Their teammate, Wizard, reprimands him with taunts that highlight lack of skill and knowledge. Julius defends himself by qualifying his inexperience as situational.

(R) Wizard: You fricken noob [taunts]!

(R) Julius: Yes, I'm a noob with this guy [game champion]. I need to sell this. It ain't no good. What should I sell, Luc [protecting self-image and sharing knowledge and coaching]?

(R) Wizard: Beast mo! Beast mo! This is a good game, Harry [taunts and pleasure in the game process].

(R) Harry: This *is actually* a good game [pleasure in the game process].

(R) Julius: I did that for fun. Just for the sake of it. Ahhh, I died [pleasure in the game process].

The game ends and Wizard jumps from his chair and raises his arms in the air like a prize fighter. His team is victorious and they watch the recap of the last two minutes of the game. The

members on the defeated team ignore the large screen on the wall. Although Julius played with a champion who was completely new to him, he is on the winning side. He announces, “I’m never playing with that guy again.” The group decides to leave the teams as they are for the next game. Julius talks incessantly throughout the game. He is sitting next to his brother, Harry. Sometimes his talk is directed to his computer screen, sometimes to Harry, and sometimes to the group. At times he makes nonsensical sounds. Harry, who is usually quiet, engages in the same kinds of behaviors that Julius models. A few minutes into the game, Harry becomes more focused and is less inclined to follow his brother’s lead. He even chastises Julius for failing to follow the group’s community norms. Their interactions turn into a kind of sibling rivalry where competence in game playing is the deciding factor of rank.

(R) Julius: I smell death and decay because I farted. [laughs and repeats] Run, run, run. You need to run.

(R) Harry: Oh, I farted bad. I really did.

(R) Biggie: Hi Flash. Flash – Hi [teasing]. [Flash’s champion is hiding in the jungle of the game map.]

(R) Julius: Hey Luc, Harry isn’t helping me out when I ask him [group accountability].

(R) Harry: I don’t help you cause you don’t help the team. You die on purpose. Why should I help you [group accountability and group norms accountability]?

(R) Julius: I do not. Okay, since you say I die on purpose, I’m going to die on purpose [protecting self-image].

(R) Harry: I'm helping the team. You've been dying the whole game. Kill somebody [group accountability and challenging].

(R) Julius: I can't kill nobody with this guy. You're lucky I just don't punch you [protecting self-image and challenge outside of the game].

(R) Luc: Will you guys just stop arguing, please [coaching].

(R) Julius: I'm arguing with him cause he says I die on purpose. I would beat you if I had my guy, Fiddles [protecting self-image].

(B) Trey: No! Harry would beat you [individual recognition].

(R) Julius: With Fiddles and my runes [protecting self-image]?

(B) Trey: Yeah, even with your runes [individual recognition].

(R) Luc: Just work with us, ok [coaching and collective action]?

(B) Rick: Tanks, stop forming – please [coaching].

(R) Julius: Look at Harry die [taunting]. [He repeats several times.]

(R) Harry: Shut up! You suck [protecting self-image]! [He looks at Julius' screen and reads his game stats.]

(R) Julius: You shut up. I try new people [game champions] [protecting self-image].

(R) Luc: Stun 'em now! Back up, dragon [Julius' user name]. Oh, he got away. Good job [coaching and collective action].

(B) Rick: [to Ruben] Don't run into the jungle [coaching].

(R) Julius: Look at Harry just standing to the side [taunting].

(R) Luc: Harry, back up. Stun now [coaching]!

(R) Julius: Who me?

(R) Luc: Yes! Too late. Harry, red buff first [coaching].

(R) Harry: Get Trey down there [coaching]!

(R) Trey: I heard that. You guys are not going to get me [challenging].

(R) Julius: Trey's a tank. We can't get him [sharing information].

(R) Harry: He's not that tanky [ability to take heavy hits] [sharing information].

(R) Julius: Harry, you back yet? I'm smart enough to know we need you since you got fed [acquired power by killing opponents] [group accountability and collective action].

(B) Trey: Now it's a good game [pleasure in the game process].

The game ends with Harry and Julius' red team defeated. Ruben is again the target of criticism even though his team won the game.

Flash: We need to trade Ruben. He took all of our buffs after we told him not to.

Ruben: I didn't take all of them.

Ruben stares at his computer screen with his head slightly down. With Flash's insistence, he quietly gets up and moves to a computer on Luc's side of the gaming area. Harry and Julius

banter between them about who can beat whom. They begin a new game and Harry and Julius make flagellation noises at each other. Luc tells them to stop but Julius continues to make loud noises. The store instructor asks Julius, "Why are you going nuts?" to which Julius has no answer, but he continues to play the *League of Legends* game.

The community practices of the digital gamers provide for fluid shifts in power dynamics among different ages. Power and status are based on factors that primarily derive from playing the game. Knowledge and skill inside of the game, and adherence to community norms, both inside and outside the game are valued as status markers.

6.7 Mentees Applying Lessons Learned

With its return to the Ridgeway Community Center, the structure of the gaming class includes a requirement that the gamers engage in a short academic exercise before they begin their game play. At the beginning of class they are asked to write a summary about their field trip with Luc to a museum. Only the younger gamers are present. Rosa, the girl who attends the gaming class occasionally, also is present. The older gamers rarely attend the gaming class when it is conducted at the community center. Most of them play the free online *League of Legends* from their homes.

Ruben fidgets in his chair and pecks on his keyboard as Luc explains the required learning task. Trey and Rosa attempt to follow Luc's instructions and the writing prompts he has written on the board. Ruben has two computer windows open. One is the word processing program where he is supposed to write his summary; the other is the *League of Legends* game with which he interacts when Luc is not watching. The lab attendant notices Ruben's distraction

and warns, “You don’t want to lose your computer lab privileges, do you?” Ruben closes the game window and struggles to compose the required summary. He peaks at Rosa’s computer screen next to his and then types. Misspelled words indicated by a red line underneath, are Goggled. After they finish writing, Luc asks them to switch seats to read each other’s summary. Ruben reads Rosa’s paper he consulted while writing his own. He writes, “This doesn’t make sense. You need to make it make sense.”

Harry and Julius did not attend the field trip and they are required to do a different task. They play a vocabulary game where they chose the correct definition of a word. Ten grains of rice are donated to starving children for each correct answer. Julius provides commentary throughout his play. He reads a word aloud and voices his rationale for discounting a given definition, then announces his choice. He boasts loudly about the level he has worked up to in the game. Harry brags that he is at a higher level. Luc looks at their screens and tells them they cheated since they manually changed the level of the vocabulary game and did not work up to the levels. They both laugh. Julius and Harry are interested in competing for higher status based on proficiency in the vocabulary game. Cheating appears to be an acceptable means for gaining status. It is humorous and entertaining when the cheating is discovered and acknowledged.

After the twenty minute learning activity, all the gamers open the *League of Legends* game before Luc has an opportunity to announce that it is time to play. After a brief discussion, the team with Ruben, Trey, and Julius are on Red; Luc, Harry, and Rosa are on Blue. As they prepare to play, Rosa misunderstands Luc’s instructions and chooses a champion with specialties for playing the support role. Harry already chose a champion for support so they will be playing with an imbalance of champion abilities. When this mistake is announced, the opposing red team

reacts with celebration and taunting. Ruben jumps from his chair and at one point puts his face close to Rosa's as he repeats loudly, "It's on! It's on! It's on!" Rosa does not react.

When they begin to play Julius makes a comment about no one cheating. He puts his jacket over his head and stretches it over his computer screen. Ruben mimics Julius and does the same thing using his sweatshirt. Julius talks throughout the game. His melodramatic enthusiasm is intensified compared to that of the software store and the presence of the older gamers.

(R) Julius: I'm running! [Breaths hard as if he is running and out of breath from exerting himself.] Can't catch me! [repeats several times] Can't catch me!

(R) Trey: [grinning] Ruben, watch when we get our items.

(R) Julius: Boom! That was to help you Trey. It didn't help the other team at all. Ooooh, Luc. I know you love that. I got more items than Luc and Rosa. Good job Rosa.

(B) Luc: [sarcastic tone] Congratulations, big guy.

(R) Julius: Chase me! Chase me! Come on!

Although the red team has an advantage over the blue team, there is still discord among them. Ruben and Trey show some impatience with Julius.

(R) Ruben: Oh My God, Julius! Come on! You got to help me! Trey, I can't play with –
[He points to Julius sitting next to him.]

(R) Trey: Come on Julius, play smart! Julius, go up there!

Trey emulates the coaching norm of the group. His words are reminiscent of Luc who often advises the gamers to “play smart.” During an interview, Luc identified Trey as the most promising gamer among the new players. His affinity to Luc’s coaching maxims may contribute to this assessment. Trey looks at Ruben’s screen and acknowledges an early achievement in the game. He uses the opportunity to coach Julius in his actions.

(R) Trey: Dang, Ruben! You already got it! Julius, look what he got. Play smart!

(R) Harry: I got one, too! [Harry kills Julius’ champion.]

(R) Julius: Yeah, he does have one. Harry, the only reason you beat me is cause you got attack damage. Harry buys the same exact things for every AD person.

Harry wants to be recognized for this accomplishment even though he is on the opposing team. He looks for affirmation for his individual accomplishments. Ruben’s champion dies in a fight and he gets upset with Julius. His complaint to Trey sounds as if Julius is not abiding by the ethic of group accountability.

(R) Ruben: He had his ulti [ultimate weapon] the whole time!

(R) Julius: [defensively] I did not have my ulti! Look!

As the game ensues the boys continue to make comments that bring attention to their individual accomplishments and compare them.

(R) Ruben: Look how much money I have. How much damage you do, Harry?

(B) Harry: 204.

(R) Ruben: I did 224.

(R) Trey: I did 234.

At one point Rosa kills Ruben's champion and Luc comments on her actions.

(B) Luc: You did that on your own Rosa. I don't hear you talking now, Ruben.

(R) Ruben: What do you mean? The tower did most of the damage.

(B) Luc: Yeah, but you chose to stay.

(R) Ruben: I could have killed her.

(R) Trey: [to Julius] I can't believe you didn't get your witch hat [an item for his game champion].

Rosa kills Ruben a second time and he dismisses it as luck. Since skill is valued over luck for assessing a player's competency, the boundary of age is blurred as the younger player, Trey, admonishes the older player, Julius. Knowledge and skill in the game influence the power position of coach and the recipient of coaching. Trey's team wins and Luc asks Trey for a rematch.

(R) Trey: Luc, you said we didn't have to play another game.

(B) Luc: I know, but would you give us another?

(R) Trey: [laughs] Okay, we'll give you one more game.

The teams are left as they were before. The red team makes hand signals and mouth directions to each other as they prepare for this second game. Trey notes that Rosa has chosen

the champion, Ashe. He laughs aloud and begins teasing and taunting, declaring, “My Jax is going to jump on you and take half of your life. And his [pointing to Ruben] will take all of your life cause you’re squishy.” [The character cannot take much damage before losing all of its health.]

As the game ensues, Trey congratulates himself. He claims individual recognition more frequently in this gaming context than he did at the Microsoft store.

(R) Trey: Hey, look at me! I’m Filthy!

(R) Ruben: Back up Luc! I thought it tickled [weapon shot]. Boy! Boy!

(B) Luc: It does [tickle]. You guys are so much quieter this round. Now that you – oh no!

The adult supervisor, Luc, uncharacteristically engages the bantering, albeit briefly. His team is losing when Julius announces he must leave for home. Luc wants him to stay longer and play. Julius does so even though he said he needed to leave.

When interviewed, some of the gamers indicated that Luc’s interactions with them included action and engagement, and they acknowledged his power position. They knew he controlled access to rooms in the building, imposed rules for the gaming class, provided transportation to field trips where he approved who could attend, and he could ask gamers to leave when their behavior was dangerous or too disrespectful. However, Luc was also viewed as a gamer and as athlete. Luc came closer to being viewed as “one of them” when he engaged and experienced the gaming world with them.

6.8 Changing Community Dynamics

During the first 20 minutes of class students are to design a poster about not being distracted while driving. The computer program, Photoshop, is open on their screens. Ruben is frustrated with the assignment. He sits in front of his blank Photoshop page and insists Luc stay with him and tell him what to do next. He complains to Luc, “I don’t know how to work this thing.” When he does begin to create the computer drawing, he quickly sketches stick figures meant to be a boy driving who is distracted by two girls. It is near impossible to make out the images and Luc comments on Ruben’s effort, “If you have to spend the time on this you may as well try to do a good job. Do you think that is a picture that would win [the competition]?” Ruben becomes even more impatient with the task. He quickly erases what he drew and complains loudly. Luc responds, “If you’re going to have an attitude today, I don’t think you can stay.” Ruben quiets down and begins to draw a figure that resembles a car. After a few minutes, he calls out, “Luc, is this any better? Luc!”

Ruben, Trey, Harry, and Julius are present today. Julius gets into a game with virtual gamers and does not play with anyone in the class. Ruben, Trey, and Harry team up for a 3 on 3 game against a virtual team on the Internet. They freely talk strategy aloud since their opponents are not physically present.

As they play, Ruben calls Luc for help. Luc responds to Ruben but eventually tells him, “You’re not listening,” and moves away from him. Ruben acts on his own in the game and suffers the consequence of his actions. “Oh, now I see,” Ruben says aloud to no one in particular. He had to go through the experience of seeing why Luc’s advice is the right move before he accepts it over his own inclinations.

Overall Ruben shows little enthusiasm for playing the game and tells Luc he doesn't care when his champion is about to be killed. As the game nears its end, he announces, "I'm just going to end it. This game is so boring." A few minutes later the game ends in a victory for Ruben's teams. This is the first time Ruben has exhibited this nonchalant behavior toward the game.

The next game was configured with the gamers in attendance. Ruben teams with Harry and Trey on the red team. Luc, Julius, and a new class member comprise the blue team. Ruben creates the game and immediately begins taunting and teasing talk. He says to the new player, "Accept it [game invitation] my noob. Hurry up, accept. Harry advises, "Ban Fiddlesticks [game champion]. Then Julius is useless."

The new gamer announces he wants to play with the game champion, Temoo. After hearing this, Harry bans Temoo from use by the opposing team. The new player is anxious about having to play with a different game champion. Members of the red team laugh about their success in rendering both Julius and the new gamer powerless. The new gamer and Ruben bicker over why it was wrong to ban the champion, Teemo. The bickering between them continues throughout the game along with Julius' continuous dramatic commentary, such as,

(B) Julius: If Master Yi has his ulti he would burn Shaco. ...Just let them poison themselves, slow and painfully. ...I'm trying to get him to come to me. He's MIA! Run! Run like the wind! Watch out! They're going to go after you, Luc. ...I take that as a compliment. You got a problem with that!? How do you like that, Harry?

(R) Harry: How do *you* like that?

(B) Luc: [to Julius] You need to stop talking strategy out loud.

(R) Ruben: [He writes something about the new gamer in the chat box and then calls his name, Rashawn.] Rashawn! Can you read that, Rashawn!

He has written, “Rashawn, you suck.” The new gamer immediately begins to threaten Ruben. He is three years older and of a larger build. Ruben responds to his threats, with

(R) Ruben: You’ll beat me up in real life cause you’re bigger, but not in this game.

(B) Julius: Stop talking, just fight.

(R) Ruben: [to the new gamer] You did 16% damage so shut up boy! Boy!

With the immediate challenge of the opposing blue team in the room and Rashawn, Ruben becomes more interested in performing well in the game. His demeanor changes from disinterest during the first game with virtual players, to a more aggressive fervor.

6.9 Community Values and Individual Competencies

For the 20 minute academic activity Luc shows a video clip of a city council meeting where he recently took some of the youth from the community center on a field trip. The gamers are asked to record key points the mayor and council members give in response to a question posed by one of the community center’s youth. Harry and Julius poke each other, and Ruben complains, “Luc, I don’t know what I’m doing.” When the video clip ends, Trey proudly announces, “Luc, I wrote this much,” as he holds up his paper. Julius pulls two office chairs together and lies down on them but the middle part of his body is unsupported and sags toward the floor. When Luc asks what they wrote each gamer reads something from his paper. Their

notes are nonsensical except for Trey's and Rosa's. Luc instructs everyone to write down what Trey and Rosa share. He collects their notes and reminds them they will use them next week to write letters to the city council that is reducing the operation hours of all the city community centers.

The gamers configure 3 on 3 teams with Ruben, Trey, and Harry on the red team, and Luc, Julius, and Rosa on the blue team. As they begin to play, Julius laughs out loud and shows Harry a drawing on his arm he calls a tattoo. Harry shows Julius a drawing on his arm and screams with laughter. Julius continues ranting and Harry becomes more focused. Rosa says very little while playing the game:

(B) Julius: I ate like a hundred pieces of candy before I came. I want your blood!

(R) Trey: He's kinda acting like someone homeless... in the street.

(R) Harry: [to Julius] Please stop it.

(R) Trey: Just cause you killed someone doesn't mean you're the beast.

(R) Ruben: I buy the first one [ward]. Trey, you buy the second one. Harry you buy the last one.

(B) Julius: [makes nonsensical noises] Run back, Rosa! Run!

(R) Ruben: MIA! No MIA, or something?! You can call MIA?

(B) Julius: [to Harry] You gotta call your MIAs.

(B) Luc: [to Rosa] Go all the way back to town [home base]. Buy your boots.

(B) Julius: Ah, you got me. [He makes a loud crying moan.]

(R) Harry: [Turns his screen away from Julius' view.] Hey, you're trying to cheat.

(R) Ruben: [shouts at his screen] What are you doing?!

(B) Julius: [makes nonsensical noises] He's on a killing spree! Why you going back?

(R) Ruben: Scary Luc! Scary, scary, scary.

(R) Harry: Luc, you're not going to get me.

(B) Luc: My ult comes back in 20 seconds.

(B) Julius: I saved you. I kept you from getting paralyzed.

(R) Harry: Come on! Hurry up guys. Where did you put the ward [a device that enables a player to see opponents hiding in the bushes]?

Trey's champion comes out of the bushes and surprise attacks Julius' champion.

(B) Julius: It don't matter. Keep trying.

(R) Ruben: Harry, have you bought your ward yet?

(R) Harry: Yes!

(R) Ruben: Finally!

(B) Julius: Warning, warning. Fart, may contain deadly smells.

(B) Luc: You guys have to communicate. Tell me when someone's MIA. ... Good job, Rosa.

(B) Julius: I'm coming, I'm coming, I'm coming.

(R) Ruben: Let's do this man.

(B) Julius: Run to me, Luc! Run to me.

(B) Luc: [to Julius] Shoot our stun into the bush. They could kill me if I get hit. I have pretty low health. ... Alright, I ignited him. Come to the tower!

They play for a few more minutes with Julius concentrating more on the game action and making fewer unnecessary comments. They play to a point where Ruben's team is nearly defeated. With little hope of coming from behind for a win, the red team surrenders.

When the game ends Rosa leaves for home. Devon enters the lab and quickly takes her empty chair. He does not want to play with the gamers in the class. Instead, he chooses to play with virtual gamers. Luc forms a team with the remaining four gamers and they invite virtual players to compete against them in a 5 on 5 game. As they wait for the game to load, Harry inspects the champions of the opposing team and comments, "Are we playing with noobs or something? Look what they got!" These younger gamers reject the notion of themselves being "noobs." Like the older, more experienced gamers they played with at the Microsoft store, they are quick to categorize others who may know less than themselves as "noob."

Many of the group norms and practices that were manifested at the software store surface here as well. Where applicable, they are noted in parenthesis as in the following dialogue.

Harry: Hey man. Look at my critical. I'm like critical every hit [individual recognition].

Trey: Shaco [game champion] MIA [group accountability]!

Harry: Oh yeah. Shaco, MIA [group accountability]!

Trey: Where you think you going boy [taunting]?

Ruben: Ah – You guys didn't call MIA [coaching and group accountability]!

Trey: Oh yes we did [protecting self-image]!

Harry: We did call MIA! Didn't you hear us? [protecting self-image]

Trey: Teemo, MIA [group accountability]!

Harry: MIA, Teemo [group accountability]!

Luc: Shaco, MIA! Okay [group accountability]?

Trey: Okay!

Luc: [to Julius] Heah, you want me to take over [collective action]?

Julius: You said to do it this way [shared learning and protecting self-image].

Luc: Yeah, but you're not quick enough [coaching and collective action].

Trey: Go sneak it. Go all the way back here [coaching].

Harry: My chicken sense is tingling [enjoying the game process].

Trey: Hey, come here real quick, Julius [group accountability and collective action]!

Ruben: I got that! I got that! I got that buff, Julius [individual autonomy]!

Julius: Okay!

Ruben: Luc, can you help me get blue buff [collective action]?

Luc: Take that dragon [coaching].

Ruben: I'm not taking that dragon [individual autonomy].

Luc: Well I can't get there right now [individual autonomy].

Ruben: Harry, there's something called help your team and don't just go for the kills [coaching and group accountability].

Harry: I am [protecting self-image].

Trey: Hey, we can tower dive him [collective action and out-strategizing opponent].

Julius: Get 'em, Harry! Go beast [challenging and individual recognition]!

Ruben's champion dies and he lets out a loud sigh. He begins to debate over who successfully killed the monster at the buff [individual autonomy].

Luc: It's okay, guys. We're on the same team. I'd rather us get it than them [coaching and collective action].

Harry: Come on Trey. [with a squeal] Let's gooooo! [collective action].

Trey: Guy – you sound so weak [group norms accountability]. [Trey demonstrates an expectation of self-expression of the other gamers.]

Ruben: Julius is stupid! I'm not inviting him to a game. He's taking everybody's kills [group accountability and group norms accountability].

Luc: Group up! Group up [coaching, group accountability, and collective action]!

Harry: Okay. We got to group up [collective action].

Ruben: Julius, go top [coaching].

Trey: Julius, go top.

Julius: Shut the hell up [individual autonomy].

Luc: They're just trying to tell you the right thing to do [coaching, collective action, and group accountability].

As their skills and knowledge of the game change over time so do the behaviors and perceptions of the gamers. They pose and accept more challenges, take more risks, and assume the role of coaching and sharing knowledge more readily. Each game presents new opportunities to be recognized by one's peers as proficient and to boost one's own self-image, as well as present challenges and risks of being deemed deficient, and criticized for not following game rules and community expectations. Those who continually return to the game and the community accept the challenges in exchange for the possible rewards.

6.10 Summary

Over time and contexts there was continuity in the gaming community's group values and norms which constituted symbolic meanings. Table 6.1 summarizes participants' consistent actions and behaviors described in detail in this chapter and their corresponding common meanings among group members. The gamers valued challenge within the game and among themselves. They posed and accepted challenges where they were expected to take risks in the

face of those trials. Along with challenge there was prolific coaching and sharing knowledge and information among the gamers. It was part of the group ethic of collective accountability and action while still allowing opportunities to exercise individual autonomy and recognition of one's accomplishments. The gamers' on-going and evolving efforts to adhere to group norms and expectations contributed to creating and protecting self-image. This process is elucidated in the discussion of the research findings in Chapter 7.

Table 6.1: Ridgeway Gaming Class Signs and Symbols and Group Norms

Actions as “Signs” (Group Norms)	Signs as “Symbols” (Group Norms)
Challenging and Accepting Challenges	Garnering Individual recognition. Defending one’s image. Taking risks. Exercising individual autonomy. Teasing and taunting. Taking pleasure in the game process.
Chastising without total exclusion	Coaching and communicating knowledge. Accountability to team (or whole group) Taking collective action
Coaching and Communicating Knowledge	Accountability to team Exercising individual autonomy. Garnering individual recognition.
Exercising Individual Autonomy	Using individual funds of knowledge (i.e. language, game choices, and out-fitting game champions).
Learning from Others	Taking collective action. Exercising individual autonomy. Accountability to team.
Out-strategizing Opponents	Progression of competence in the game.

	<p>Exercising Individual autonomy.</p> <p>Accountability to team.</p> <p>Taking collective action (sometimes).</p> <p>Taking pleasure in the gaming processes.</p>
Taking Collective Action	<p>Accountability to Team</p> <p>Coaching and communicating knowledge</p>
Taking Risks	<p>Progression of competence in the game.</p> <p>Accountability to team.</p>
Teasing and Taunting	<p>Garnering individual recognition.</p> <p>Challenging and accepting challenges.</p> <p>Taking risks</p> <p>Taking pleasure in gaming processes.</p>

Chapter 7

“GOODNESS” FOUND, IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

This chapter begins with an overview of this study followed by a discussion of the findings. After suggestions for further education research, implications of study findings are presented. The chapter ends with discussion statements about the significance of this study and its limitations.

7.1 Summary of Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate how a group of adolescent males from ethnically diverse, urban, working-class backgrounds constructed their male identities in the process of applying complex mechanics and strategies within the socio-cultural contexts of playing the digital game, *League of Legends*. A related interest was how these performances may inform instruction in schools.

The major research question that guided this inquiry was, “How do male digital gamers construct selfhood within an informal learning context and across other social contexts?” Six more specific questions were examined to gain insights into the major question. They were:

- How is digital gaming and the contexts in which it occur sources of identity construction?
- What function does the informal learning context of digital gaming play in the development of racial and class masculinities?”
- What individual knowledge do gamers bring to the gaming contexts and how is it privileged or suppressed in the gaming contexts?

- What ideological contradictions exist between the institutional learning environment of the gaming class and those of the adolescent males in terms of identity formation?
- How are study participants perceived and guided by adults in the learning context that impact their identity development?
- What languages and/or symbols are used in the gaming context that indicate group identity in terms of gender, ethnicity, or class?

Data were generated from observations, informal and formal interviews, and document analyses focused on how the gamers used language and acted in different situations inside and outside of the gaming class. One-on-one tutoring of the researcher by the gamers provided additional data about their values, beliefs, communication preferences, and cultural markers. During our “conversations,” the gamers shared stories about their behaviors and performances of identity across social contexts such as school, home, and community.

While the gamers brought their individual perspectives, histories, and forms of communication to the game play they all adapted to common forms of group communication and expectations. Shared communications were in the form of denotations (game vocabulary) and connotations (innuendo). There was also one particular goal shared by all the gamers which was to out-strategize opponents through progressive learning over time. This was identified as the most appealing aspect of game playing, rather than the violence in the digital game.

The data illustrated that the gamers were highly influenced by macro level hegemonic ideologies of masculinity, such as being aggressive and competitive. This influenced their male identity standards across multiple contexts, including formal schooling. Within the social structure of the gaming class, the gamers followed group norms and performed various roles

such as gamers, mentors, mentees, coaches and team members. Many of the group norms that emerged from the data collected constituted specific elements of masculine construction of identity since gamers could engage in competitive and status seeking activities. Such norms included issuing and accepting challenges; coaching and communicating knowledge; defending one's image; exercising individual autonomy; garnering individual recognition; out-strategizing opponents; taking risks; and teasing and taunting. Other group norms supported gamers in their learning processes such as chastising without total exclusion; learning through multiple sources and modalities; and taking collective action. Validation of membership in the group necessitated adherence to these group norms.

Older, more experienced gamers indoctrinated younger, new gamers. Many of the group norms that emerged from the data collected constituted specific elements of masculine construction of identity. These findings suggest that contextual engagements were connected to perceptions of competency and status among the other gamers, and the construction and verification of male identities.

7.2 Discussion of Findings

The portrait of the Ridgeway digital gamers constructing their identities is set within a social structure and interactions based on Burke and Stets' (2009) definition, where gamers enacted consistent patterns of behavior through role, group, and person identities. Gamers' actions were driven by their responses to the signs and symbols in the social context regarding perceptions of their identities. When these "self-in situation" meanings were out of alignment with the gamers' personal "identity-standards" they manipulated the interconnected resources to counteract contradictions. Resources included physical and psychological supports that were

available to gamers to use in their interactions with objects and other people in the social system. The learning that occurred and the sustained functioning of the group were tied to these processes. The enactment of role, group, and person identities and how they were supported are central in making deeper sense of the portraits of the gamers both individually and collectively. As suggested by Burke and Stets (2009), role, group, and personal identities are references for guiding behavior across various situations and they impact identity verification processes.

The development of the group identity of the Ridgeway gamers was partially rooted in the digital game itself. The *League of Legends* digital game design provided a “Situating Learning Matrix” as described by Gee (2008) which tied together identity, achievement of game goals, and social interactions. As suggested by Gee (2008) and Squire (2006), the game design helped to establish relationships between players which made the gaming experiences more meaningful and supportive since the social group that evolved provided feedback, debriefing, interpretations, and explanations for the members. Thus, gamers developed a social identity within their community of practice that played an essential role in their social, intellectual, and strategic learning.

In addition to building community and social identity among the gamers, playing *League of Legends* served as an outlet for the physical energy among young males that Cleveland (2011) and Sewell (2009) considered an important support for intellectual learning. The data show instances where horseplay was quickly transformed to deep concentration and focused clicking of computer keys when the gamers began engaging with the game. This suggests Cleveland’s (2011) description of Sensing-Feeling Interpersonal and Intuitive-Feeling Self-Expressive preferences were better accommodated through gaming processes. More importantly, playing the

complex game ignited enthusiasm for learning complex skills through active engagement with game mechanics and strategies. Gamers took ownership of their own and each other's learning, and they were successful with additional multidimensional instructional supports such as scaffolding, modeling, and visual and audio enactments of game language and strategies. For example, players did trial and error experiments with in-game use to get an idea of its components before consulting manuals and other forms of instruction.

Another resource that was available to the gamers to help them regulate their in-game interactions was a set of signs and symbols. As Burke and Stets (2009) found in their research, the signs and symbols found in the gaming class were part of the gamers' shared thoughts and actions that were used to garner approval, recognition, and status for the gamers and the champions they controlled in the game. For example, the vocabulary and terms in the digital gaming used to refer to the attributes and abilities of the game champions, and strategy maneuvers for them facilitated ease of communication among the gamers. Common language signs became symbols that facilitated communication within the context of game playing. The meanings and responses to these signs and symbols were similar among the gamers. Many of the group's norms were encoded in their symbolic communication. Through the gamers' consistent patterns of behavior and communication, a group identity was further solidified and manifested. These processes can be better understood by working through some of the interactions that surfaced in the group's construction of their identities during gaming sessions.

In playing the digital game the Ridgeway gamers adhered to group norms such as taking risks, communication, peer teaching, and accessing multiple channels of learning that addressed different modalities. Group norms held several symbolic meanings. For example, accessing

different instructional supports implied using individual autonomy to be self-directed learners. Risk-taking demonstrated a willingness to take courageous actions to make adequate progress over time. Exercising autonomy and risk-taking were tied directly to conventional aspects of male identity construction such as exercising control and being courageousness. Communicating with and learning from others also implied that the gamers were expected to act collectively in acquiring knowledge and skills needed for acceptable progression toward efficacious game play. Learning from others included reciprocity in seeking and accepting coaching, as well as providing coaching to peers. Over time, all of the gamers acted as coaches to someone else, if only in the midst of game play when they directed other team members to position themselves somewhere on the game map, purchase a specific game weapon, or assist them in an attack. Even the most inexperienced gamers received moments of recognition for what they were learning along their pathway to expertise. Gamers were accountable for their own learning as well as that of the members of the group. This norm is consistent with Cleveland's (2011) pathway of reinforcement for developing communication and collaboration as acceptable everyday male behaviors. It also challenges hegemonic constructions of male identity that support stoicism and individual problem solving as described by Connell (2005), and Gurian and Stevens (2005).

As their competency increased the gamers' identities and alignment to group norms had a corresponding effect. With greater confidence in game knowledge and skills the gamers practiced a higher ascription to group norms and their symbolic meanings.

A significant part of identity as male and gamer was to out-strategize opponents. The violence against an opponent was symbolic of one's mental prowess to "joke" or out-smart

another gamer. Physical power over one's opponent was contingent upon mental pursuits in learning and practicing game skills. It signified the gamer's developing competence and his worth as a contributor to team efforts for which he could gain more respect and status among the group. Gamers who waived in adhering to group norms were chastised but they were not completely banished. This practice supported the ethic of accountability to the group even when its members faltered, and reinforced group identity markers of taking collective action, coaching, and communicating knowledge.

These group behavioral norms and expectations had profound implications for male gender identity verification processes in this study that were similar to those described by Burke and Stets (2009). A gamer who perceived his gender enactments as less than his personal standards could enact one or more of the group's norms for manipulation and adjustment of the perceived meanings of his male identity. For example, when a gamer was perceived as a player who lacked courage he was sometimes taunted with sounds of a clucking chicken. In such cases, a gamer could rectify this perception of cowardice by increasing his learning through a host of multidimensional instructional devices, and using new knowledge to challenge others in game play. In this way he could defend his personal image and align self-in-situation identity meanings with his personal perceptions of male identity. These maneuvers were powerful, effective, transformative, and resources that acted as forms of coercion to encourage and entice the gamers to conform to and support the norms of the group.

In the Ridgeway gaming context the availability of resources was based on experience and status within the social system. The more experienced gamers held higher status and controlled more of the signs and symbols. They did more taunting, took more risks, posed more

challenges, and out-strategized opponents more often. As the newer gamers increased their knowledge and skills, they were better able to engage with the language and symbolic communication of the group, which positioned them to actualize group norms more effectively.

The experience of the gamer, Rick, illustrates this point. After becoming very skilled at *League of Legends*, Rick introduced it to the other gamers in the group. He was called upon to share his expertise, and he often took great pleasure in taunting and teasing opponents. Younger gamers sought to emulate Rick's success by accessing and controlling to a greater extent the resources within the social system. His position as expert player enhanced Rick's identity construction and verification. His game profile pages illustrated that he played the digital game far more often than any of the other gamers and was documented proof of his success in the game.

The gamers received feedback while playing the digital game as well as outside of the game that reinforced malleable beliefs about learning outcomes. Feedback in the form of teasing, critiquing, commands, and peer modeling created a belief among all of the gamers that with practice they would improve. They readily weathered taunts and teasing and most of them adopted that form of feedback themselves. It helped the gamers recognize that their abilities were not finite, fixed, and imposed by outside forces, but malleable and within their control. As suggested by Dweck (2007) and Steele (2010) this form of feedback provided a supportive learning environment that enticed trial and error and risk-taking. In this way, Cleveland's (2011) idea of making learners feel safe so that they are willing to engage in learning processes that threaten hegemonic constructions of male identity was addressed.

According to Yuqing, Kraut, and Kiesler (2007) people are generally attracted to groups whose members have perspectives and attitudes similar to their own. These commonalities among Ridgeway gamers included being male, urban life, marginalization from mainstream U.S. society, an attraction to participatory and/or spectator sports, and interest in digital games. These commonalities crossed differences in ethnic and cultural backgrounds and helped to maintain group cohesion. While the individual Ridgeway gamers were from various ethnic, cultural linguistic, and age backgrounds their group identity of gamers often compensated for their differences. These gamers took on the gamers' group identity while still maintaining a sense of who they were individually. This too engendered group members to see themselves positively as "us" and "we," thereby enabling unified actions and similar behaviors. Evidence of this affinity was Ridgeway gamers preferring team configurations of members of their local group. When they did play with unknown virtual players, they still made references to "us" against "them" and were critical of players who did not follow some of the same procedures and norms as their local group did.

Having aspects of both a common identity and a common bond social group explicated by Yuqing, Kraut, and Kiesler (2007) was another factor that helped to sustain the group formation and functioning among the Ridgeway gamers. Through on-line synchronous communication via the chat box gamers could learn the values and beliefs of virtual players to develop interpersonal bonds and broaden community affiliations. They had the added advantage of being physically accessible to each other that added textures to their interactions that were not possible in virtual exchanges. They also were part of the larger Ridgeway Community Center where they participated together in other activities and events that gave them the opportunity to create and intensify bonding relationships. Furthermore, approximately half of the gamers were

of Mexican heritage and spoke Spanish, an ethnic identity marker (Benjamin, 1997). This common cultural heritage was sometimes used to support their collaborative learning, communication, game playing, and identity development.

Along with common bond relationships, there were other group processes that were consistent with a common identity-based grouping environment as described by Yuqing, Kraut, and Kiesler (2007). Ridgeway gamers were usually configured into mixed-ability teams that fostered a common identity group through tasks involving joint accountability. Teams created common goals, fates, and rewards as gamers competed against other groups of gamers in class, on-line, and in *League of Legends* tournaments. Such events fostered Ridgeway gamers' whole group identities and commitments by raising consciousness of out-group and in-group status. In addition, membership in the group provided gamers with "self-enhancement" since they usually evaluated their own group and team as superior to others. These self-evaluations supported group collaboration, communication, and sustainability. Emblematic of common identity-based grouping, newcomers were welcomed based on their interest in the game. They were expected to conform to the group norms that were well established by the class supervisor and the traditions of the older gamers. Their conformity was evidenced by their continued participation and their emulation of the older gamers. In addition, discussion during game play was primarily restricted to completion of the group task, another characteristic of identity-based groups. Gamers held each other accountable for focusing their attention and discussions on the game. Bantering was viewed as part of the process of game playing. Off-task talk was either ignored or participants were admonished to "shut up."

It was also common for Ridgeway gamers to support their teammates, as is the practice in identity-based groups. Slacker friends were compensated for to ensure the team's success, but they were chastised for not performing to the group's standards. This "generalized reciprocity" was based on the belief that supporting individual members guaranteed the group mission. It was a form of cooperative learning where group members hold one another accountable while they model appropriate action needed to complete collective tasks.

Friendships within the group accounted for chastisement without total exclusion. The gamers freely admonished each other when they did not perform at expected competency levels, improve at expected rates, and generally did not follow group norms. It was common to publicly berate or trade transgressors to the opposite team, which symbolized partial rejection and public sanctioning. The practice also was a form of collective self-censuring as explained by Cleveland (2011) and Ferguson (2001), where group members use power to effectively monitor themselves and maintain the functioning of the group.

Another characteristic of identity-based grouping evident among the Ridgeway gamers was change over time and space. Attachment to the group remained strong for the older gamers as long as there were factors that continually interested them in being part of the group, such as the relocation to the Microsoft store. The gamers made connections to the Microsoft employees based on their common interest in playing a particular digital game. Over time, some of the friendship bonds of the older gamers were maintained through virtual on-line gaming and others places outside of the Ridgeway class. All of the younger gamers except for one continued to attend the gaming class before and after the Microsoft store sessions. This suggests that their connection to each other was related, at least in part, to their affinity to the gaming class, thereby

constituting a common bond. Yet their interest in playing the digital game was fierce, so that common identity grouping factors were also instrumental to the gamers' regular attendance and passionate participation.

The combination of relationship and interest-based grouping was a source of cohesion that helped sustain the functioning of the group. In addition to interest in performing well in the game, bonds of friendship were sometimes sources of patience and communication for bringing non-conforming gamers into the fold. Friendship bonds also augmented collaborations and exchange of knowledge and information. These bonds created the kind of relationship-based and engaging learning environment Cleveland (2011) recommended for reengaging some boys in academic learning.

Along with flow of physical and psychological resources, another component of social structures involves patterns of behavior as people interact (Burke & Stets, 2009). In the Ridgeway gaming social network individuals occupied positions where they enacted role identities such as instructor, new gamer (noob), and experienced gamer (beast). The behaviors of the gamers followed consistent patterns in their interactions that were guided by the principle of "role reciprocity." This means they related to each other based on specific roles. For every role enacted there was a counter role, or "counter identity" to that role. Burke and Stets (2009) posited that this co-dependency is important for maintaining a social structure. One important role identity was that of the supervisor (Luc) of the gaming class which was reciprocated by the roles of the class participants. Luc functioned as a prototypical role model who facilitated a predictability component of expected behaviors for the gamers. This reduced uncertainty for them about their environment, which was another condition for creating more supportive

learning conditions according to scholars such as Cleveland (2011), Squire (2002), and Squire, Devane, and Durga (2008).

The supervisor acted as a backdrop in guiding the citizenship and responsibilities of the gamers who were embodied in their social identities, and performed in their role enactments. Just as Cleveland (2011) emphasized the necessity of teachers positioning themselves as effective guides, the gaming class supervisor developed trusting relationships, partly by adapting his functions according to the culture and needs of the group. Through his dual role as gamer and supervisor, Luc demonstrated how to access and manipulate resources within the social structure for successful learning, game play, group interaction, and ultimately male identity constructions that conveyed appropriate standards to the gamers. His shared interests and experiences shaped his role for what Cleveland (2011) termed a “leader coach model” for teaching life skills. By attending to relational competency, Luc also embodied the description of the “educacion” concept provided by Valenzuela (1999), which requires teaching responsibilities of citizenship as a prerequisite to other learning.

Part of Luc’s ability to function as he did was the structure of the class itself. With five to ten class participants at varying degrees of gaming proficiencies, he had time for one-on-one instruction to newcomers in the group who sometimes became frustrated with the complexities of the game. This provided a basis for foundational knowledge and skills that empowered gamers to move on to more independent learning. Gamers reciprocated by soliciting individual instruction from Luc as needed, and availing themselves of other forms of supports from him. Luc also assisted gamers in building prerequisite literacy that assisted them in engaging in more self-directed and independent learning. In performing his role, everyday male behaviors of

asking questions and taking risks was normalized. New gamers consistently called to and requested he sit with them as they learned. As suggested by Cleveland (2011), for these gamers gaming literacy was an essential pathway that empowered them to communicate and collaborate more efficaciously.

The complex nature of the game positioned Luc as a perpetual learner as it did the other gamers. While he consistently demonstrated respectful interactions with others, Luc practiced group norms such as high interest and pleasure playing in the digital game, trial and error actions for learning purposes, and coaching and sharing knowledge. These behaviors involved distributing resources that garnered Luc respect, and these behaviors were generally emulated by the other gamers.

Two other important role identities of the Ridgeway gamers that were interconnected through role reciprocity were “noob” and “beast.” The actions of the more experienced gamers were complementary to the younger gamers and vice versa. As new gamers entered the social structure, their role identities were shaped by the culture of the group. Older, experienced gamers attached the identity of “noob” to the newer gamers with constant reminders of their lower role, predicated on their inferior gaming skills and knowledge.

An image of the “beasts” with shadows of Luc’s prototypical role emerged from the gamers’ portrait. They acted as mentors, challengers, and role models for the new, younger gamers, and for each other. Sharing knowledge produced a collective of “coaches” to which all the gamers could avail themselves, and when they did not, team members still imposed “coaching” on others during intense game playing. New gamers were mentees and emulators of the older gamers. Their cooperative functions were interconnected and kept the resources and

transformations flowing which also helped sustain group cohesion. New gamers who emulated older gamers were positioned to interact with each other and subsequent new gamers as they were inculcated into the group. Their role and social identity functions were reminiscent of the influences of peers described by Gibson, Gandara, and Koyama (2004), and the web of social relationships used to assist in learning as described by Valenzuela (1999). These peer influences and social supports for learning purposes were powerful contributions to engendering motivation and pleasure in gaming processes.

Sometimes interactions between noobs and beasts presented challenges since reciprocation required agreement about meanings and expected performance of role identities. Individual understandings of role identity directly influenced behaviors, and meanings sometimes had to be negotiated and compromised. Gamers usually successfully negotiated their respective role identities as evidenced by the continued enactments of their roles and periodic transformations. Some behaviors changed over time as individuals adjusted in role identities to correspond with their negotiated understandings. For example, Ruben continually attempted to adjust his behavior to fit the expectation of his role within the group, such as following his team's game plan and refraining from arguing and fighting. As he attempted to enact behaviors that were consistent with his own and others' expectations, Ruben manipulated resources of the social system to achieve identity verification. His history of showing bravado through physical fighting and arguing was replaced with using group norms such as taunting, teasing, challenging, and acknowledging his increased competency in digital game play. These male identity markers were consistent with his standards of what it meant to be male. If his negotiations had been unsuccessful, Ruben would likely have voluntarily withdrawn from the gaming class, or he

would have continued to engage in actions destructive to the social system, consequences suggested by Burke and Stets (2009).

Over time the gamers' role functions proved to be fluid and dynamic. All of them acted as coaches, mentees, challengers, winners, and losers at some point in time. This fluidity allowed each one of them to move in and out of subordinate and power roles. Being positioned in a subordinate role often makes a learner feel vulnerable. However, vulnerability while learning was a normalized condition to which gamers were accustomed. As suggested by Cleveland (2011), the euphoria of success while experiencing the vulnerability of uncertainty was another pathway for engaging learning that was supportive for young males.

Despite differences in levels of gaming skills, noobs and beasts were generally distributed equally on opposing teams in an effort to maintain competitive play. Newer players benefited from their observations of the more experienced gamers. However, they were subjected to incessant verbal criticisms for their inexperience. Yet, most of the noobs returned for more verbal haranguing each week, and in between time they researched, practiced, and learned. They demonstrated resilience, autonomy, and self-direction. These qualities were normalized in their group and used as resources for male identity confirmation, as illustrated by the constant struggle of new gamers to advance from the position of "noob" to the higher status of "beast."

The systematic processes of males moving from one stage of development to another described by Sewell (2009) was approximated by gamers moving from "noob" to "beast." It required a combination of ritual, brotherly care, acquiring knowledge, and demonstrating skills. In their role as mentors, the older gamers functioned as "keepers of the gate" in terms of who could "crossover" from "noob" to "beast" positions. It was a "rite of passage" that compelled

newer gamers to dedicate themselves to making progress in their game playing competencies, and provided them with a “sense of purpose” in learning and a means for acquiring more status and respect among group members. Much of their effort tethered them to the norms of the group which they were obliged to obey, enforce, and perpetuate. Their gender identity development and confirmation were tied to the normative operations of noob-to-beast protocols that had to be observed for the gamers to make their “passage.”

However, the fluidity of roles and functions placed older gamers “at risk” of having their gaming skills equated with those of the newer players. They took action to protect themselves from being labeled “noob” and to protect their identity as “beast” by using group norms to assist them in protecting their status. Having such an identity-dependent goal supported all of the gamers in the development of attributes such as autonomy, resilience, social competence, problem-solving skills, and critical consciousness. Sewell (2009) described these attributes as products of initiations that were historically required of males for successful completion of rites of passage.

The Ridgeway gamers experienced role identities that encouraged the enhancement of self-esteem, self-efficacy and self-worth. One contributing factor was success with gaming tasks in past performances and experiences. The teams of mixed abilities allowed newer gamers to experience success. The more success in the game, the more self-efficacy and self-worth increased which enticed gamers to play even more. Another source of this self-enhancement was learning acquired from observing other gamers competently performing in the digital game and reaping success, rewards, and recognition. This prompted gamers to attempt to do the same so they could receive the same benefits. A third source of support for building self-esteem was

derived from the social influences within the environment. It included group norms and expectations that gamers would take the necessary actions to progress at a reasonable rate over time, and implicitly communicated, "You are capable." Together, these three enhancing factors influenced the gamers' psychological reactions before, during, and after they performed gaming tasks, thus constituting a fourth information source similar to those identified by Boykin and Noguera (2011). With heightened self-efficacy, the gamers gained a heightened assurance that the available resources sufficiently supported their success in gaming, which was connected to achieving male identity verification. In so doing, their feelings of worth and empowerment were positively impacted.

Another concept identified by Boykin and Noguera (2011) that applied to the gamers was the practice of constructive processes that involved setting goals, such as learning new game champions, ascending game levels, and monitoring and regulating their own cognitive processes. Their behaviors were guided and constrained within the context of game playing to achieve goals that parallel Cleveland's (2011) description of IN TIME's (Integrating New Technologies into the Methods of Education) active learning methods. This involved continual self-evaluation and adjustment relative to their goals, which enhanced gamers' engagement and performances. They also thought before acting in playing the game; exercised control while playing; and engaged in self-reflection after playing in the form of group bantering, criticism, boasting, and through review of game statistics on their game profile pages and video clips available at the Microsoft store. Their after-game dialogue included appraisals of self and others' performances that provided opportunities to make adjustments in actions in future games to achieve greater efficacy.

Multiple transformations took place within the Ridgeway gaming social system while playing the digital game and adhering to group norms. Physical energy was transferred to the mental demands of game play. Knowledge and skills were converted into public displays, assessments, and acknowledgements. These impacted the roles and positions of gamers who were evolving over time from beginner, to intermediate, to advanced players. Transformations of attitudes and social skills also occurred over time, as did pathways to empowerment.

The gamers' role and social identities were guided and supported in ways that indicated they were in developmental stages of emerging adulthood. Multiple developmental supports were provided, such as modeling group membership, and space and time for self-reflection and correction when behavior was inconsistent with the rules of the social system. Behavioral guidance was delivered through meaningful activities and appropriate supports necessary for success in those activities. This allowed gamers to practice individual and group autonomy that moved them toward self-regulation. These processes were the antithesis to institutional regulation that often structures school environments by labeling and sorting, and banishment and punishment of male students of color as described by Ferguson (2001).

The gamers had ample opportunity to experience personal-authenticity through individual autonomy and self-expression given their freedom to make a number of choices. They had the choice of joining the gaming class, several choices within the game platform, the goals they set for themselves and the extent of practice as they worked toward individual proficiency levels. Gamers could also exercise self-expression through their selections of the aestheticisms offered in the game. This was accomplished through choosing game champions, and how they outfitted their champions with powers, abilities, and attire that they deemed aesthetically captivating, or

“cool.” Such processes gave gamers a sense of their individual authentic selves that supported their “person identities.” Gamers also exercised control in becoming “experts” in certain aspects of the game, as demonstrated by developing expertise with one or more specific game champions and specific strategies they learned. As suggested by Squire (2006), learning was enhanced as individual expertise was valued and publicly recognized by peers. Occasionally, tempers flared when measures were taken to block access to specific champions gamers were known to have exceptional proficiency controlling.

As gamers researched and interacted with their game champions of choice, they often came to identify with those champions. Some gamers spent actual money on outfits called “skins,” to dress their avatar game champion who they “bought” for exclusive rights to play. They beamed with pride when they were complimented about their champion’s skins as if they themselves were wearing the imposing “cool” outfits. Their personal identification with their champions was further solidified by playing the game as they constantly referred to their champion in the first person. They saw themselves in the powerful form of their avatar heroes exacting the miraculous feats on the computer screen.

Some hegemonic conceptions of maleness as described by Connell (2005) were embedded in the gamers’ sustained attraction to playing an aggressive and highly competitive digital game. In addition, they all expressed high interest in playing or watching aggressive sports such as football and boxing, and their dialogue as they played the game indicated a value for male aggressive power. One way the gamers attempted to exercise power and gain respect was based on how much “damage” they could do. Through controlling their computer avatar champions, the gamers were incarnated into “heroes” who could vicariously “kill,” “beat,” and

“beast on” other game champions. In addition, all of the gamers expressed an aversion to playing the “support” role in the game which was more passive than other options. They identified the thrill of out-strategizing other gamers, ascending in higher levels and rankings, and the violence as key features for their attraction to the game. Thus, hegemonic cultural references of masculinity were used to entice, provoke, and motivate learning. Ironically, Ferguson (2001), Gutzwiller (2009), and Majors and Billings (1992) argued that such enactments in formal school contexts are often met with punishment and exclusion.

As Burke and Stets (2009) suggested, the person identities of the gamers represented their individualism which required negotiation and compromise to function successfully within the group. To that end, trust and collaboration were needed as gamers decided the extent they would exercise their personal identities within the norms of the gaming social system. This was illustrated well by “John,” a thirteen year-old who rarely spoke. At times he was pressed by others in the group to speak up during game play. John negotiated his personal identity, and over time became more vocal to meet the expectations of the group. In John’s case, trust and collaboration prompted him to negotiate and transform part of himself. Verification of personal identity fosters feelings of self-authenticity and enhances self-esteem. John’s self-esteem increased as he met the expectations of the group. He credited his own transformation by stating, “I do what I’m supposed to do.”

The experiences of other gamers illustrated similar negotiations of their personal identities. Ruben negotiated his assertion of his power through physical fighting by directing his aggression into gaming competition. Julius converted his penchant for incessant chatter into game bantering and commentary. Harry negotiated his stoicism by becoming more

communicative and demanding when engaged with the game. Trey overcame his non-confrontational demeanor by boldly speaking out about non-conformity to group norms. Each of these transformations involved giving up some aspect of the personal identities the gamers brought to the context, and exchanged them for a heightened sense of self-efficacy, which according to Boykin and Noguera (2011), contribute to building self-esteem.

Consistent with self-complexity theory, as the Ridgeway gamers engaged in gender identity verification processes, shared aspects of meanings and perceptions related to their racial, ethnic, and class identities were addressed. One example of this combination was Spanish speaking gamers using their bilingualism to out-strategize opponents. While they were primarily focused on verifying their male gender identity through gaming processes, by speaking their cultural language aspects of their ethnic identity were verified in a positive way. The Asian ancestry gamer, whose ethnic group is sometimes stereotyped as less athletic than some other groups, experienced positive confirmation of his ethnic identity. Wizard, of Hmong heritage, rarely spoke or exhibited much emotion when he was not engaged in digital game play. When he did play, he embraced the group norms of team accountability, risk taking, taunting and teasing, challenging others, and garnering individual recognition. These norms are similar to attributes of aggressive competitive sports environments. Wizard's perceived meanings of his self-in-situation as powerful, aggressive, and physically imposing through control of his game champion may have challenged or negated perceptions to the contrary.

All of the Ridgeway gamers were members of marginalized ethnic groups that are often stereotyped in negative ways. The prejudicial assumption as having substandard academic skills, such the ability to memorize, synthesize, and apply massive amounts of information, was

challenged by their judicious use of resources in the gaming social context. As gamers enacted multiple forms of deep learning, publicly displayed their knowledge and skills, coached and communicated knowledge, and out-strategized opponents, they demonstrated complex intellectual abilities as well as verified the worth of their ethnic, race, class, and personal identities. Occasionally, different identity verifications were combined, however, the Ridgeway gamers were more interested in gaming processes connected to their gender images. This was evidenced by three phenomena. First, verbal taunts and teasing focused heavily on expectations of male gender performances. Players who allowed themselves to be severely beaten or out-smarted were berated with descriptive vocabulary such as raped, smacked, and juked. This is language usually associated with male power and control over women, or males perceived as effeminate, weak, and less cunning.

Second, race and ethnic differences were often over-shadowed when gamers were deeply engaged in game play that presented challenges to male gender identity. For example, the close alliances between Spanish speaking gamers of Mexican heritage were temporarily diminished when they were teamed against each other. This also happened when gamer participants teamed with Microsoft store employees. As they worked passionately toward out-performing others, and gaining bragging rights against the opposing team, their dialogue was indicative of common identity grouping as described by Yuqing, Kraut, and Kiesler (2007), with minimal exhibitions of ethnic or racial similarities or differences.

Third, the common practice of gamers of the same age group and gaming proficiency levels coalescing together across race and ethnic differences indicated that male identity verification superseded other variables. One indication of this was when the gaming class no

longer met at the Microsoft store, older gamers stopped attending and chose to play on-line across race and ethnicity with gamers who were at their game levels and rankings. Younger gamers continued to attend the class at the community center where they too, played together across race and ethnicity boundaries. These actions suggest a preference for affiliations with others in similar developmental stages based on age and abilities more than ethnic and racial identity.

Given their degree of choices and self-expression, the gaming context provided what Ferguson (2001) alluded to as a kind of “third space” where gamers took control of their own subjectivity. They could perform their maleness in ways that were individually and socially meaningful to them and which afforded them a degree of physical and social power. Thus, in their roles as gamers these youth experienced a heightened sense of confidence and self-efficacy. This was symbolized by their willingness to try new and difficult challenges such as experimenting with game champions that were unfamiliar to them. Their risk-taking provided gamers with more opportunities to learn and increase their skills, and ultimately experience success along with failures. Successful gaming experiences heightened feelings of self-worth as the gamers viewed themselves as assets to their game teammates; provoked positive feelings and embraced active learning processes; verified identities; and cultivated behaviors that helped to sustain their social system.

7.3 Recommendations for Further Research

Much of the research on video console and digital computer games has focused on the ills of playing too many games that distract young people from engaging in serious academic learning. Such research has raised concerns regarding the socio-emotional development of

gamers, many of whom are purportedly developing more aggressive behaviors. However, this research takes a myopic view of digital games and their potentialities. In the United States 97% of children between the ages of 12 and 17 play video games on home consoles or digital computer games (Marsbury, 2011). Research is needed that examines the potential value of gameplay for academic development. The "Serious Games Movement" has a goal of designing digital games to educate and to persuade for positive influences (Marsbury, 2011). In support of this aim studies also are needed that focus on the socio-emotional influences of gaming processes outside of digital games themselves. Such research should include comparative studies of digital game play for learning purposes across different contexts. Most often a very different approach is used with games in formal school settings than in out-of-school settings. In most formal school environments digital gaming is an add-on activity and played in isolation. Broadening the range of inquiry across different contexts can expand the scope and integration of knowledge.

Research that extends outside of the design of the digital game should include action research in authentic learning environments. One important context to study is where participants are immersed in routine game playing processes that create affinity groups through their engagement in collaborative and collective actions in competitive team play. Such contexts provide opportunities to further examine social-cultural processes that may reveal knowledge to support identity development and academic processes.

Findings from this study challenge the notion that a teacher or instructor is unnecessary when students engage with digital games. More research is needed on the roles of coaching within game play and how these functions may be approximated in formal learning settings. Given the multitude of diverse types of digital games and unique contextual elements of each

situation, the dearth in knowledge is extensive. The results could provide some alternative instructional techniques worthy of pursuit in teaching culturally diverse students in K-12 classrooms.

Future work should continue to examine formal and informal contexts for broadening understandings of different needs and transformations of males of color across situations. Studies of young males constructing identities across various contexts may provide educators with clues regarding the socio-cultural processes that simultaneously support learning and male identity development, and how these insights can be used to improve the performance of male students of color in various learning situations.

More research on how learning in digital gaming extend, confirm, and disaffirm knowledge regarding what works for males and females and what does not is needed. Such inquiry also has the potential to inform how games can be reconfigured for education purposes for youth who are underserved in formal school environments. Further research of digital games that privilege intellectual aptitude while attending to notions of physical competencies, verbal dexterity, and other dimensions of masculine identity in gaming and in formal education has the potential to assist young males in diminishing a focus on only physicality in defining masculinity.

7.4 Implications of Study Findings

The results of this study confirm game learning theory and Culturally Responsive Instruction (CRI) assertions that context is a key factor that impacts student learning and development. Both physical and psychological resources in the context of the gaming social

structure were effectively used by the gamers to enhance their self-worth, self-efficacy, and self-authenticity. At the same time gamers' expressions of their maleness allowed them to achieve male gender verification. Consideration of how these processes may occur in other contexts, such as formal schools and community agencies, has profound implications for educators and community leaders who need to expand their knowledge and practices to support gender construction processes in learning environments. Low income males of color have historically been indoctrinated with hegemonic stereotypes that define their masculine identities according to physical power over mental power. They need guidance and modeling in other ways of being male. This necessitates strategic planning of learning environments and activities in and out of formal schooling that explicitly attend to constructions of identity verification as males and as learners.

In an effort to minimize negative arousal and promote positive arousal in learning environments, educators can work toward neutralizing discrepancies between self-in-situation identity perceptions and students' individual identity standards. The portraits of the Ridgeway gamers can assist in guiding the development and negotiations of the group, role, and person identities in other learning contexts. The goal is to create socio-cultural processes that do not place extreme stress on social learning contexts such as classrooms and other learning spaces in communities, and to support individual students to make compromises in their own personal identity standards. To this end, some specific implications of this study for development of group identity in other learning environments are:

- Connect social interactions with adherence to group norms, progress in learning, and male gender identity verification to create a web of interdependent behaviors.

- Implement research based strategies proven to be effective for engaging underachieving males in their learning such as Cleveland's (2011) pathways for reengagement.
- Develop group identification through both common bond (based on relationships) and common identity (based on interests) grouping practices.

Group identity and individual self-regulated learning can be developed simultaneously through modeling during the observation and practice phases of learning that include challenges and ways to confront them; encouragement of active participation; feedback and social reinforcement; and guidance of analysis of beliefs, fears, and misconceptions.

Designing learning communities with both common bond and common identity group dynamics can foster cohesion that is more supportive for some males. Common identity dynamics help group members share common interests and values, while common group or friendship bonds help create and maintain the group's norms and values. This suggests that homogeneous groups in which members have similar experiences, backgrounds, and competencies are more effective for some underserved males in learning new knowledge and skills. Therefore, developing role identity that is more supportive for some groups of males include

- Provide a prototypical model with whom male learners identify in terms of gender, shared experiences, and interests.
- Develop leaders among young male peer groups based on emulation of the prototypical group member who models values and actions for successful learning.
- Connect achievement of learning goals to gender identity development that mark meaningful life passages for specific male peer groups.

- Create mixed-ability groupings where common goals, fates, and rewards engender collective action and reciprocity between group members and their role functions.
- Develop identity roles that are fluid and dynamic so that learners experience being in power and subordinate as normal processes in learning.
- Provide consistent information sources that enhance feelings of self-efficacy and self-worth, such as past events of success and observation of peers being successful in their learning.
- Design role experiences so that learners engage in research-based active learning methods such as continual self-evaluation and making adjustments relative to goals.
- Base role identities on the premise that young males are developing toward adulthood and require appropriate supports, concessions, and guidance needed for individuals in various stages of this developmental process.

Some of the resources and processes within the social system of the Ridgeway digital gaming class are worth consideration for other learning environments. One important psychological resource was the process of young males moving through a kind of “rite of passage.” Passage was controlled by the older experienced group members, thereby creating a system of peer supports and sanctions that could be included in structuring other learning situations through mixed-ability grouping that work toward accomplishing compelling challenges. Newcomer gamer mentees could envision themselves in their reciprocated mentor role almost immediately at a minimal level since they shared knowledge and skills with others very soon after entering the social system.

Reciprocal roles that allow members to support group norms and processes can assist some males in learning environments. Reciprocal roles enhance interpersonal abilities that help young males learn to interact more effectively with others to achieve their common goals. When the accomplishment of an individual goal is tied to group or team goals, and the necessity of group cooperation, young males can better make adjustments to their identity and behavioral repertoires. They are more likely to perceive the meanings of group norms and demands by others as means to meet their own needs than attempts to control them and diminish their personal power. With the development of reciprocal “role identities,” group membership shifts from an “I” perspective to a “we” perspective so that “we” cooperate with each other to reach “our” goals.

The male supervisor of the gaming group played an essential role in providing an on-going example for the gamers to follow in their peer leadership and instructional roles. In other learning contexts such as formal schooling, young males may be better served with consistent day-to-day participation of adult role models in varied meaningful tasks. Small groups that allow for building relationships on a one-on-one basis between students and adults can be a powerful way for teen males to negotiate their masculine identity development.

Providing multiple challenges and forms of support to meet them in learning environments may increase and sustain motivation among young males. This is to develop competencies that garner them status within their social networks, and assists them in moving through life-stages initiations. Progress in learning that is directly tied to perceptions of male identity can enhance boys’ desires to increase other knowledge and skills over time. For some male students, such as the gamers in this study, more emphasis on challenges to individuals configured in teams to

accomplish tasks may be more effective than competitive individualism. The Ridgeway digital gamers were able to experience immediate gratification while engaging in game playing when their physical energy was combined with demanding mental tasks. Knowledge and skills acquired over time were routinely made public to their social group when they played the game. It was a kind of public “assessment” of self-regulated learning. Thus, long-term learning goals and tasks in other settings should be directly connected to more immediate learning tasks and assessments.

Young males also should be provided with learning experiences that allow them to observe incremental improvements over time. For the gamers, when their immediate task of game-playing was connected to long-term learning goals, they worked toward improvement outside of the gaming class. As self-regulated learners, they were anxious to engage in digital game “homework” so they could put into action what they learned on their own.

While physical power and violence are part of hegemonic constructions of male identity, as indicated by the findings of this study, out-strategizing opponents was of equal or greater importance to the participants in this study. Educators and community leaders can use this preference as a tool in achieving learning goals while arranging for analysis and critique. For the support and development of person identities, findings from this study implicate actions such as:

- Provide male learners with opportunities for self-authentication such as self-expression and autonomy through making choices.
- Create opportunities for young males to experience self-efficacy and self-worth when they give up something of their authentic selves to conform to group norms.

- Allow males to have a degree of control, competitive learning experiences, and opportunities to apply their learning to out strategize others.

Community leaders, agencies, and educators are faced with the quagmire of supporting males as they construct and verify their male identities, and critically analyzing their own masculine identity standards that are tainted with hegemonic views that reify gender stereotypes. By ignoring its paradoxical potentials and challenges, adults who guide and teach are complicit in the underachievement of underserved boys and the perpetuation of aspects of hegemonic masculinities such as physical power as the quintessential measure of masculinity. Since there are multiple masculine identities across social groups, a variety of contexts must be examined and evaluated when determining resources and transformations that can best support male identity construction processes and learning. These analyses might begin with an assessment similar to that described by Stets (1995), of the stimuli that young males respond to emotionally in different situations, examination of how these responses are manifested behaviorally, and consideration of the effects different interventions have on attitudes and actions. Important questions educators across contexts can ask in regard to identity development and verification processes are:

- How are boys who struggle in learning environments perceiving and evaluating the stimuli they receive in relation to their male identity standards?
- How do males of color perceive others' perceptions of them?
- How are males of color perceived by self and others in different settings and relationships?

- Are perceptions of being less male further exacerbated when boys are members of marginalized groups who have historically struggled for dignified masculine identities?

With the consideration of these questions adults in schools and community agencies can take action to help young males access personal, interpersonal, and structural resources for identity development and verification.

Digital games also hold great potential for developing, or perhaps “manufacturing,” cultural knowledge that could be used in education. Findings from this study showed that *League of Legend* gamers were required to learn massive amounts of information specific to the game. This was a kind of “tacit” or “inert” knowledge. With minor changes, game designers could introduce language and references that would be familiar and meaningful to students in formal school settings. The names of the 90+ champions in the *League of Legends* game offer such possibilities. For example, they could be changed to correlate to the names of elements on the Periodic Table used in chemistry. Some names of game champions that currently exist are Anne, Ashe, Brand, Dr. Mundo, Fiddlesticks, Jax, Master Yi, Malphite, Ryze, Shaco, Teemo, and Warwick. The abilities and powers of the game champions could correlate to applicable chemical elements and combinations in chemistry. Each game champion has a collection of four hierarchical “abilities” that players enact to attack and defend themselves. One example of a champion whose name might be changed is Anne. Her avatar is a little girl who has the ability to throw fire balls and cones that are called “disintegrates” and “incinerates.” With this flammable theme she could be named a highly flammable chemical element such as “Phosphorous” or “Neon.” Her abilities could be renamed with chemical elements that would intensify the

flammability and destructive qualities of phosphorous. Another game champion has abilities that slow down and freeze opponents by shooting frosty, icy substances. If this particular champion were named something like “Count Carbon,” and his second level ability weapon enabled him to shoot dry ice at his opponent, players could become familiar with the chemical compound for dry ice, CO₂. This could be done with other game champions under the direction of capable chemists. There are possibilities for renaming champions who have explosive powers (Plutonium), freezing powers (Helium), poisonous gas powers (Fluorine), or the ability to shield with exceptionally strong metal armor (Tantalum).

A common recommendation by game learning theorists is that the storyline of digital games be modified to enhance educative qualities. While the *League of Legends* game played by the participants of this study was very complex, the storyline was simplistic, kill the enemy and destroy the enemy nexus (base camp). Given this simplicity, there appears to be room for modification without over complicating this particular game. Targeted gamer populations need to be consulted about their interests in possible alternative storylines of the digital games they play, and then examined for possible connections to academic content.

7.5 Significance of Study

The significance of this study lies partially in “Looking for the Goodness” with its paradigmatic shift away from research models that are often ensnared in cultural and mental deficit ideological traditions. From its inception, the foundational principle that guided this inquiry was not viewing the “achievement gap” as a gaping hole in the knowledge and skills of particular populations of male students, but instead as a dearth of understanding amid professionals charged with meeting students’ educational needs. This study was predicated on

the belief that students who do not perform to their academic potential in institutions of learning in and outside of formal school settings, achieve at different levels across different contextual situations. Its goal was unique in seeking to illuminate socio-cultural processes that support autonomous, self-directed, and efficacious learning among young males of color who hold membership in groups that are typically identified as “underachievers.” It was distinguished from more conventional approaches to research that characterize study participants as “broken,” and where knowledge is sought to change students so that they fit neatly into existing mainstream institutions. In this study the idea that transformation must occur solely within individual students was challenged, and the idea of mutual adaptation among students and learning institutions was embraced. Studies of this kind are important as they provide diverse approaches to exploring complex issues from multiple vantage points.

The significance of this study also lies in its unique approach to relationship building and communication between the researcher and the researched. Learning to play the digital game with participants as instructors was a kind of “ethnographic rites of passage” for the researcher that facilitated building relationships with the gamers by becoming a pseudo “member” of the community of *League of Legends* adolescent, male, game players. With a common game interest, exchanges of trust were more likely to occur as participants behaved as they normally did while engaged in game playing. The participants shared aspects of themselves, offered assistance, and became more willing to expose their vulnerabilities. Through gaming, participants engaged in authentic conversations with the researcher because they were comfortable in the communicative processes of the game. This choice of methods for data collection created “grace spaces” where the researcher and the researched moved from separated socio-cultural and sociopolitical boundaries into shared borderlands (Symonette, 2009).

Adolescent males are generally positioned in subordinate roles that require adult guidance. For this study, the power dynamic was inverted when the adult researcher was positioned as the student who was tutored by the expert, adolescent, male gamers of color. Their knowledge and skills were valued over that of the adult, academic outsider. They also were provided with a familiar platform of engagement where they generally felt competent, comfortable, and in control even as they communicated with a researcher they likely viewed as “opposite” from themselves in every way. Research methodologies such as these that offer effective alternative strategies for entering the study site less conspicuously, gaining the trust of participants, and enhancing communication between researchers and participants, contribute to both more authentic knowledge and culturally sensitive techniques for conducting research with ethnically, racially, and culturally diverse participants and communities.

The construction of the “story” of the study participants was grounded in portraiture research methodology which enhances the significance of this study as well. The voices and perspectives of participants were privileged even as they operated in chorus with that of the researcher’s. Portraiture attends to the rich description advanced by ethnographic research techniques while providing varied contextual descriptions in which data are embedded and made more humanized and authentic. It is an aesthetic rendering of the data that is not commonly used in standard Western academic writing. In so doing, this methodology is a viable alternative to more conventional ones. Research studies that use unique methodologies such as this one can serve as an example exploration for other novel research and analyses techniques that may produce more positive and illuminating insights into the often overlooked learning strengths and possibilities of different students of color.

7.6 Limitations

While the ethnographic techniques that were employed in this study enabled the collection of data generated in real world situations, it was not a full ethnographic study. Data collection in the field lasted for only five months. This impeded relationship building between the researcher and study participants, and limited the depth and scope of data collected over time. Data collection and quality were further limited by the researcher's position as an outsider to the community. However, a prior relationship between the researcher and some of the study participants already existed that made entry into the setting and data collection procedures less invasive and unfamiliar to some of the participants.

The focus of study was one group of digital gamers that constituted a "case study" so generalizability of study findings is limited to theoretical implications. Data and findings were presented as rich descriptive portraits of individual participants and their group interactions. This format was meant to create vivid imagery of the phenomenon under study, the constructions and verifications of male identities of a group of adolescents of color. Data and findings are also illustrative and expansive in the knowledge base which suggested further research questions and pursuits.

The study site was an informal learning environment which further limited the transferability of the results to learning contexts such as formal schooling. Nevertheless, there were some similarities between the study site and formal school environments. A supervisor of the gaming class acted somewhat like a teacher in formal school classrooms. Much like a teacher, the supervisor planned structured and unstructured learning activities, provided instructional support, and managed the class in an orderly fashion to maintain an environment

conducive for learning. However, there were some notable differences as well. The supervisor played and learned the complexities of the game with the class participants. He was in a power position, but his role as gamer was emphasized more than his power role as supervisor.

Therefore, how this supervisor offered inspiration, guidance, and support for both the social interaction and technical learning of the gamers can instruct facilitators of learning experiences for those males of color in other contexts.

Although I, as a researcher, come from an urban and working class background, as did the participants in this study, as a middle age, African American female, my positionality and biases were far removed from those of the adolescent male gamers. Throughout this study I posed questions regarding my unique experiences and points of view. This began with a reflection of my historical, personal, and professional experiences that brought me to this research. I continually reflected on how my experiences and knowledge shaped the data collection and interpretation processes. I also used member checks that were the participants who held different positions at the study site. With these member checks I was often able to confirm or disaffirm data and interpretations, and thereby control somewhat for the potential research bias that is often present in this kind of investigation. Yet, the likelihood of some research bias has to be conceded.

7.7 Conclusion

Cleveland (2011) asked a series of questions of educators about boys who struggled with academic achievement in an effort to identify clues for better supporting them. Along with academic skills, educators identified a set of nonacademic factors. One was “social confidence” which entails having a network of friends, a positive attitude about self and learning, and access to multiple learning supports. A second factor was the quality of interactions and experiences learners have with peers and teachers. The last factor was having the opportunity to experience success that engenders feelings of competency and a willingness to persist in attempts to learn. The informal learning environment of the Ridgeway gaming class provided all of these factors to a greater extent than has been reported for school environments where many males of color are disengaged from the social structure and learning processes. Rather than dismiss learning outside of the formal school environment as insignificant, it behooves people who advocate for and assist male teens of color to pay more attention to what is going on out of school, and how these funds of knowledge can be used to provide equitable learning opportunities of many kinds. The digital gaming class at the Ridgeway Community Center is such a site. The results produced are very encouraging; other similar sites of success and goodness need to be pursued aggressively.

Appendix A: Observation Protocol

I began by taking walking tours of the neighborhood community and visited businesses in the area that were open to the public. During these visits, I began to record the context of the study site as required in portraiture methodology.

A few weeks later, I began to attend the weekly digital gaming class which lasted for a period of five months when the data reached a point of saturation. For the first four months I acted as a participant observer and recorded detailed notes of each class. At the end of each class, I reflected on my notes and recorded my initial impressions. During the fifth and final month of data collection, I conducted exit interviews with selected gamer participants and key community center staff.

Field notes described the community and the community center including their physical features and climates. The focus in the digital class encompassed every aspect of the environment including, the physical setting, the participants, activities and interactions, conversations, subtle factors, and my own behaviors when I participated or interacted with study participants. Observations of the facilities included general appearance of common areas; staff and gamer participants' interactions; other community members who visited the center; and resources and activities offered. I took digital photos of the community as a form of visual note taking.

The structure of the notes taken was in a T-Chart format with descriptions on the right and observer comments on the left. These notes were expanded into a narrative format within 24 hours of an observation.

Artifacts were collected that pertained to the research question such as participant-created documents in the digital game profile pages. Institutional documents that applied to the research were examined such as the community and community center website pages and printed catalogues of community center offerings. These provided information regarding historical contextual information, mission statements, and descriptions of community activities.

Appendix B: Protocol for Teen Participant Interviews

Tutor sessions were arranged after receiving signed parent consent forms and student assent forms. Tutoring sessions usually took place on Saturdays and occasionally after school in the computer lab of the community center. Study participants tutored the researcher for 90 minutes in the digital game mechanics and strategies. Participants were interviewed for 30 minutes after the tutoring session. Participants were gifted \$10 per session for their time and services, 1 to 3 times. Structured interview questions for demographic data collection were posed first. Participants were queried throughout the tutoring sessions with semi-structured questions and follow-up probes when opportunities arose. Questions were intended to uncover thinking processes in terms of participants' gaming strategies, extent of knowledge, and learning strategies and identity development processes. In addition, participants' thinking regarding attitudes toward self and others across social contexts was investigated. I generally began with questions about digital gaming and the gaming class and moved into questions across social contexts over time.

Semi-Structured Questions Posed over the course of 1 to 3 Tutoring Sessions:

(I began with game-based questions)

1. What was the first game you learned how to play? Who did you play with? How did you come to play that particular game? What did you like and dislike about the playing?
2. If you could choose any digital game you wanted, what would pick and why? What game would you absolutely avoid and why? Probes might include: Can you say more about the feature of the games?

3. Help me learn how to improve my strategy for playing the digital game you play most frequently, what are some tips you can give me? Probes might include: Can you talk more about how players learn how to improve strategies for playing?
4. If you were the instructor of the class, describe a typical two hour class that you would plan for your students. Follow-up probes might include: What would you want them to get out of the class? What game would they play and why? What lesson would you plan beforehand?
5. Suppose you were designing a video game for students to use for learning. What features would you include in the game? Follow-up probes might include: Why those particular features?
6. If you were trying to convince a friend to come and participate in this class, what would you say to him to convince him to participate? Probes might include: What would you tell him he would get from the class? What could he expect from other class participants, the instructor and the staff?
7. Is there a difference between the gaming class and your classes in school? How so?
8. How is the instructor of the gaming class like teachers at school? How is he different?
9. How is the community center like school? How is it different?
10. What do you say to each other as you play the game? If you talk about the game playing afterward or outside of class, what do you say to each other?

11. Suppose someone in your group became the best player and you found out he read about strategies for winning in a guide book. What would you say to him?
12. Name your three favorite recreational activities in order of your preference.

(Move into salient identity construction questions)

13. How would you describe yourself? What words would you use?
14. Have you ever gotten in trouble in school? What happened?
15. What do you like best about your friends? Who are your heroes? Why?
16. What do you want to be? Adult career?
17. What are your favorite television shows? Favorite games?
18. Tell me about a time when you got your best grade in school? Why do you think you did as well as you did?
19. What do you do with your friends in school? Out of school?
20. How do you escape from “the rule ridden world”?
21. How do you manage to stay out of trouble in school?
22. How would the instructor of the gaming class describe you? How would the staff of the community center describe you?
23. How would your teachers at school describe you? Are they correct?
24. How would your friends describe you? Are they correct?

25. What do you look for in a friend? Who are your friends? What do your parents think of your friends?
26. How do you earn respect with your friends? In this gaming class?
27. What ethnicity, race, and culture do you identify with?
28. What do you say or do that represents your cultural background?
29. Can you think of a symbol that would represent who you are? What is it? Why did you choose it?
30. Draw a picture of yourself doing something at school. What are you doing? Why did you decide on that activity?
31. What do you see yourself doing 20 years from now? What will be your profession?
Where will you live? What will your family look like? How do you imagine your future?
32. Now you have a turn to be the interviewer. What do you want to ask me?

Structured demographic questions:

1. What is your age? 2. What is your ethnicity? 3. What is your home zip code? 4. What is your school and grade level? 5. What is your GPA at school? 6. What is your performance level in the gaming class on a scale of 1 to 4 with 4 being the highest?

Appendix C: Protocol for Instructor Interviews

The first Instructor Interview took place one week before I began observing the digital gaming class. Questions posed were in a semi-structured format followed by probing questions.

Greetings and Explanations:

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of how different students interact with digital games in an informal learning environment. I'll begin by asking you some general questions about how the gaming class has changed over the last few months. This interview is being recorded and will be transcribed by me afterward. Is that alright with you? All information from this study will be confidential. Your participation is voluntary.

Do you have any questions so far? If there are no additional questions, let's begin.

Semi-structured Instructor Questions for the First Interview:

1. Tell me how this class got to where it is today. How has it evolved since the idea was conceived? How has it changed since it was actually taught?
2. Tell me about the participants who have been in the class. Describe their different personalities.
3. Tell me about the personality of the class as a whole.
4. Talk about the digital games that you have used in this program and how players have responded to them in the class. Follow-up probes might include: How did they learn to play the game? How did they interact with each other? With you? With the game?

5. Talk about the ways you've tried to engage participants in academic learning in this class.
Follow-up probes might include: Can you say more about any instructional materials used outside of the game? What challenges have you faced? What successes?
6. Talk about the conversations participants engage in while playing the digital game in your class. What topics are discussed most often within and beyond the game itself?
7. Describe your long term goals for this class.
8. How would you describe your understanding of the participants since conducting this class?
Probes might include: Can you say more about how you've learned more about them as learners and as players? Their interests? What motivates them to learn? What gets them excited? What troubles and challenges them the most?
9. How do you handle misbehavior in the gaming class? What is the worst behavior you have had to deal with? What did you do?
10. How do you see the participants signaling their identities in the gaming class? For example, how do they show group affiliations with race, class or gender? Are their identity performances the same or different outside of the gaming class?
11. Do you want to say anything else that you think that I should know about the participants and how they conduct themselves as digital gamers and as young men?
12. Now you have a turn to be the interviewer. What do you want to ask me?

Thank you for taking the time to talk with me.

Protocol for Instructor Interview near the End of the Study

The Instructor Interview at the end of the study observation period took place after a period of after four months. Questions were posed in a semi-structured and open-ended format to allow for emergent data questioning.

Instructor Interview near the End of Study Semi-Structured Sample Questions:

I would like to record this interview and transcribe it later. Is that alright with you?

1. During the time since I began the observations of your digital gaming class, what aspects of the class have been the same? What has been different? Probes might include: Can you say more about similarities and changes in students? Behaviors? Interests? Skills?
2. Describe the best class session that you have had during your instructional experience here? Can you say something about why you think it went as it did?
3. Describe the most difficult class you have had? Can you say something about why you think it went as it did?
4. Tell me about each one of your students and his personality. Describe the qualities of each one of your students so that I have some idea of his strengths and challenges.
5. How does each of them do in school?
6. Based on my observations over the past few weeks/months, I wanted to ask you about some things that I saw. Tell me about the kind of taunting and teasing. Why do you think they engage in such talk? Has it made some of them quit?
7. Let me summarize the main points that you have made.
8. Is there anything else you want to tell be about the class and the participants?
Historically, present or future?

Appendix D: Semi-Structured Questions for other Community Center Staff

Two other staff members were interviewed over the data collection period. Questions posed were in a semi-structured format based on emerging data.

Greetings and Explanations:

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of how different students interact with digital games and how digital gamers act and learn differently in different situations and places. All information from this study will be confidential. Your participation is voluntary. Do you have any questions so far? If there are no additional questions, let's begin. I would like to record this interview and transcribe it later. Is that alright with you?

Semi-structured Staff Sample Questions:

1. Tell me your most memorable story about each digital gamer that you know. What memories stand out?
2. Can you do a "young male character profile" of each of the gamers while in class and in other settings of the community center or outside of the center?
3. What is your policy for students who break the rules?
4. What can you tell me about of the gamers' behavior and academic performance in school?
5. Do you want to say anything else that you think that I should know about the gaming class or students?

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VITA

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