The Gamer Subculture in Lacy, WA

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Introduction

Where there is culture, there is the opportunity for subculture, groups of people who create a separate identity within and often in contrast to the dominant culture of a society. In a large society, such as America, there are many cultures and subcultures. One such is the gamer subculture, people who can be identified by their affiliation to online, tabletop, collectible card and role play games. Gamers are predominantly male, but include a wide variety of ages. If there is a large enough gamer population in an area, there is often a store to support their interests. One such store is Olympic Cards & Comics in Lacey, Washington.

This paper introduces Ken Gelder's six criteria of subcultures, then examines subculture and fandom in order to provide a better context for understanding the gamer subculture. Supported by data gathered via observation and a survey (Appendix A), the paper outlines the structure of the Olympic Cards & Comics gamer subculture before describing how they fulfill each of Gelder's characteristics. In the interest of being thorough, the paper also offers alternatives to subculture and examines why the gamers and Olympic Cards & Comics do not meet those classifications.

In his book *Subcultures: Cultural Histories and Social Practice*, Ken Gelder identifies six criteria that can be used to identify a particular group as a subculture. According to Gelder (2007), subcultures are 1) understood and evaluated negatively in terms of relationship of labor to work; 2) understood ambivalently in relation to class; 3) located at one remove from property ownership; 4) come

together outside the domestic sphere; 5) equated with excess or exaggeration in contrast with the restraint and moderation of the mainstream; and 6) in opposition to banalities of mass cultural forms (p. 3-4). While much has been written of the subculture of online gaming, little work has been done on offline gaming and the subculture of the stores that host this form of socializing.

In this paper, I argue that the gamers of Olympic Cards & Comics constitute a gamer subculture because they meet Gelder's criteria.

Subculture and Fandom

Before we delve into these six criteria and how the Olympic Cards & Comics gamers fulfill each, we will explore the concept of subculture and fandom, then outline the way gamers have organized themselves at the store. *Culture* is often defined as a set of shared, learned behaviors. A culture can be as broadly defined as 'European culture' or more specifically, 'British culture.' Usually, though, anything more specific than a broad geographic region or anything within a national boundary is categorized as a subculture. A *subculture* is a shared perspective based on a group of people's common interests and activities (Gelder and Thornton, 1997, p. 100). It is a variation or subdivision of the dominant culture. Subculture can be regional or based on an affiliation. It arises from conflict between the smaller group and mainstream society's values (Yinger, 1960, p. 525-635). In his book *The Meaning of Style*, Dick Hebdige (2003) calls this conflict "a crime against the natural order" and identifies it as a "refusal" of some portion of mainstream society (p. 3). Phil Cohen describes this phenomenon as "a compromise solution between two contradictory needs" (Hebdige, 2003, p. 77): the need to express independence from and to identify with a dominant culture. According to Cohen, the latent function of subcultures is to express and resolve these contradictions (Hebdige, 2003, p. 77). However, he also points out that subcultures operate within an imaginary set of

relations and may be out of touch with the real conditions of social structure. Like anyone, members of a subculture are affected by the ideology, economy, and culture and find their own strategies for handling the raw material of social existence. As much of what finds its way into a subculture has already been filtered through the media, subcultures are, in essence, "representations of representations (Hebdige, 2003, p. 85)." Ultimately, according to Hebdige (2003), subcultures express fundamental tension between those in power and those condemned to subordinate positions and second-class lives (p. 132).

Gamers are *fans* and, therefore, part of the culture of *fandom*. Fans are people who develop "attachment to certain forms of mass produced entertainments that, for whatever reason, satisfy personal needs (Brown, 2007, p. 13)." People can be fans of books, TV shows, movies, comic books, music, celebrities, and brands. In this particular instance, gamers are fans of the worlds and products associated with their games as well as the tools of the games themselves. All the games described in this paper require fan-level participation in order to keep up with new releases, collect valuable cards and miniatures, be familiar with the rules, and come together with like-minded gamers. In addition to playing games, gamers further their immersion by collecting miniatures, cards, books, clothing, posters, and artwork inspired by their games.

In order to have a more nuanced conception of the gamer subcultures, it is useful to understand the context of social opinion within which they operate. The word *fan* comes from the word *fanatic*, which describes someone with uncritical, extreme enthusiasm or zeal. Originally, the word pertained to temple service and orgiastic rites, conjuring images of frenzied ecstasy (Merriam-Webster, 2013). Today, a negative connotation persists. Fans, and perhaps comic book fans in particular, are looked down upon and personified as "misfits" who accumulate worthless knowledge about "crass" entertainment (Brown, 1997, p. 13). As a result, fandom is devalued and the objects

of fandom are viewed with disdain within the dominant value system. Jeffrey Brown (1997) asserts that America's dominant value system is subject to the tastes of the affluent and, as a result, fan values challenge bourgeois standards of "good taste" and are looked upon as a "disruption" (p. 18).

Furthermore, comic book fandom, which is closely associated with gamer subculture, has been particularly vilified and continues to carry a stigma of defiance and perversion. At the height of popularity, comic books were attacked by a moral backlash because they were in 'bad taste. 'Critics claimed that, like video games today, comic books were corrupting American's youth. Middle class parents led by a very unscientific Dr. Frederic Wertham, were convinced that comic books taught children how to be criminals and endorsed homosexual lifestyles (Brown, 1997, p. 19-20). The senate subcommittee even met regarding juvenile delinquency in 1954 with the intent of rooting out these 'evil' influences. The pressure was so great that many publishers went out of business and the remainder voluntarily formed the Comics Magazines Association of America in order to censor the content of their own comic books (Brown, 1997, p. 21). The counter-culture movement of the 1960s liberated comic books from such scrutiny, but the negative connotation remains in our social memory. Olympic Cards & Comics sells both comic books and games and, by association, the two and their participants are, even today, suspect.

The Olympic Cards and Comics Hierarchy

At Olympic Cards & Comics, gamers are self-organized primarily by which type of game they play. Olympic Cards & Comics, the Pacific Northwest's largest comic book shop, has undergone three incarnations into progressively larger buildings and been in the community for over twenty years. Olympic Cards & Comics caters to comic book collectors, anime aficionados, sports card collectors, and gamers. Gamers spend a great deal of time at the store, socializing as well as competing. They participate in three types

of games: collectible card games, role play games, and tabletop games (Washington, 2011; Appendix B). These three types of games are played mostly by males, but age range varies. Collectible card games generally appeal to younger ages while tabletop primarily appeals to adults. Mainly teens and adults participate in role play games. These gamers gather at Olympic Cards and Comics on a regular basis to discuss their gaming hobby, to reinforce social ties and to play against one another. Each gaming type is scheduled for a particular night of the week so as to avoid overcrowding and overlap. The store also hosts monthly tournaments for collectible card games and tabletop games, however, role play games do not lend themselves to competition.

Within the store, the gamers of Olympic Cards & Comics have created their own hierarchy, alliances, language, code of conduct, and territories. The interior of Olympic Cards & Comics is divided into halves, one for product and one for gaming. The gaming side of the store is divided into further halves, one side for tabletop and the other for collectible cards. The tabletop side consists of several tables, custom made at standing height and to particular dimensions to accommodate tabletop play. The collectible cards side consists of a few rows of lower, narrow tables that players can sit at, across from each other, during games. Role player territory is a small table surrounded by couches and chairs, located in the product side of the store.

The Olympic Cards & Comics hierarchy consists of four tiers. At the top of this hierarchy is the store owner, Gabi Trautmann. She has owned the business from its beginning. Gamers behave very fondly toward Trautmann and have significant loyalty to her. She often behaves in a motherly fashion toward the gamers, especially the younger ones, regularly referring to them as her kids. Securing her affection in return is important because her word is final and if she disapproves of a gamer's behavior, she has the power to ban said gamer from the store.

Trautmann's employees fill the second tier of authority. Some employees have worked and/or played at the store longer than others and appear to have the seniority and the power to get things done. Others have specialized knowledge or experience with a specific game manufacturer or genre and their authority stems from their expertise. The third tier in this hierarchy consists of the gamers. According to the Washington (2011) survey (Appendix B), collectible card gamers have the highest status, followed by tabletop gamers, then role play gamers. This ranking is based on a perceived ability to influence Trautmann in order to dominate resources. The final tier of this hierarchy is the shopping patrons. Their purchases support the store and garner a certain respect from Trautmann, but they spend considerably less time at the store than do the gamers and, therefore, have less face time with Trautmann and her employees.

Gelder's Criteria

Gelder's (2007) first criteria of subcultures is that they are "understood and evaluated negatively in terms of their relation to labor or work" (p. 3). Dominant culture in the United States is built upon the Protestant ethic of hard work and discipline. Idleness is frowned upon. Leisure is only "earned" through productivity (Gelder and Thornton, 1997, p. 74). Hedonism and self-indulgence are the complete opposite of the norm. Many subcultures do not work or members seek out unsanctioned means of material support such as organized crime, prostitution, or outright living off handouts or the support of others.

Gamers at Olympic Cards & Comics engage in leisure activities at the store. They meet there to socialize, play games, read comic books, and shop. According to the Washington survey (2011) of sixty five Olympic Cards & Comics gamers, 29% indicated they spent four to six hours per week at the store and 20% reported spending ten hours or more at the store each week. A total of 38% reported a monthly budget of $26 to $50 for their game hobbies. When it comes

to their leisure activities, that investment of time and money is significant. Forty hours a month on a hobby flies in the face of 'hard work and discipline' and non-gamers judge the subculture as lazy, too focused on entertainment and pleasure, and not productive enough compared to mainstream standards. In addition, there is an unspoken expectation that games are a childhood occupation and that an adult should give up collections and games (Brown, 1997, p. 18). Most of the participants in the Washington survey reported their age to be twenty six to thirty one years old, followed closely by the next majority, which was twenty to twenty five years old. Just as this subculture focuses on leisure and entertainment, it also fits Gelder's first criteria by involving a significant number of adults who, by mainstream expectations, should have already abandoned these 'childish' hobbies.

The next measure of a subculture is that it is "often understood ambivalently at best in relation to class" (Gelder, 2007, p. 3). Subcultures are often seen as having deviated from their class backgrounds. Either they have disavowed their affiliations or, more commonly, transcended class or finally, they never belonged to a class consciousness to begin with. In "In Defense of Subculture: Young People, Leisure and Social Divisions," David Muggleton is quoted as saying that "[people] from different social backgrounds can hold similar values that find their expression in shared membership of a particular subculture" (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2006, p. 129). In other words, class divisions are less relevant when it comes to examining a subculture. Later in the article, however, the authors quote Steve Ball et al. to argue that a person's actual capacity to participate in subcultures is different for different social classes. This could be based on geography or the structural and material factors of the dominant social world

At Olympic Cards & Comics, gamers have taken the transcendence route when it comes to dealing with their class backgrounds. They do not arrange themselves on any criteria other

than which games they play together and how skilled they are at those games. While the location of the store geographically limits access (underclass and upperclass may be less likely to socialize there), once gamers enter the store, class is practically a non-issue. Their population is so small that taking class into consideration when socializing at the store would limit the possible number of friendships and game opponents.

The third benchmark of subcultures is that they are "usually located at one remove from property ownership" (Gelder, 2007, p. 3). This means members of a subculture do not own their turf; they territorialize it. For example, they lay claim to neighborhoods, street corners, diners, and parks. The way in which they mark their territory is specific to each subculture, whether it's graffiti and tagging or physical presence. Outsiders who intrude on a territory will likely be met with suspicion at first, even if they are from the same subculture in general. For example, gangs are a subculture, but each gang has its own territory and simply because a person is a member of *a* gang does not mean he or she would be welcome in the territory of *any* gang.

In regard to territory, the gamers of Olympic Cards & Comics fulfill Gelder's third criterion of subculture because they are attached to a store that they do not own. Even within the store, gamers have divided the area into territories based on the needs of their particular type of game (chairs, table size, etc.). Though gamers own their game pieces, they play in a store they do not own, at tables they do not own, using terrain they do not own.

The fourth characteristic of subcultures is that they "generally come together outside the domestic sphere, away from home and family" (Gelder, 2007, p. 3). Subcultures are part of the deviation from one's initial home and family circle, the most basic unit of society and the environment in which members of a society are initially socialized into acceptable norms. Moving outside the home involves modifying those norms and values. Just as subcultures migrate away from rural settings toward the metropolis (Gelder, 2007,

p. 26), they move away from the domestic sphere and the discipline and restraint imposed by smaller communities toward divergent values and impulses.

The subculture of Olympic Cards & Comics exists outside the home and family unit. The expectations of the average home unit may not provide the freedom for self-interested individualism and gaming for hours on end without interruption, however, Olympic Cards & Comics does. Many of the games played there could be played at home or online, but gamers choose to go to the store to participate in the subculture there rather than remain in isolation. The store is a 'safe zone' where youth can begin to explore beyond the boundaries of parental supervision. In fact, after some exposure to the subculture at the store, many gamers venture beyond the building and into the broader range of subculture by attending tournaments and conventions.

In the fifth criterion, subcultures tend to equate with "excess or exaggeration, registering the 'deviance' of a subculture … in contrast with the restraints and moderations of 'normal' populations" (Gelder, 2007, p. 3). This is the most spectacular aspect of subcultures; the outward displays of style, language, behavior, and consumption. Recall from the explanation of Gelder's first criterion of subculture that American society is supposed to admire restraint, discipline, and moderation. Excessive indulgence in things such as alcohol, money, clothes, music, work, or sex is viewed as deviation and deviation is looked down upon. Individualism is a threat to harmony and stability. Subcultures use excess to make such statements to the contrary.

At Olympic Cards & Comics, gamers do not generally show a great deal of material excess. Their games have particular standards and, while one may own thousands of collectible cards or miniatures, one does not bring them all to the store at once for display or competition. But some gamers do participate in the exaggeration aspect of this criterion. Observation at the store reveals that many gamers play up their 'nerdiness' by wearing t-shirts with logos from

companies that sell products they buy (e.g., Atari or Xbox 360) or inside jokes, quotes and images from cult classic movies and TV shows (e.g., *Star Wars* and *Firefly*). Some take a page from punks and ravers, sporting extreme hairstyles such as the afro, dyed colors, retro haircuts or braids. Others emphasize their rejection of mainstream by maintaining an unkempt appearance.

Gelder's final criterion "casts subcultures in opposition to the banalities of mass cultural forms" (Gelder, 2007, p. 3). This is Hebdige's refusal, the rejection of conformist pressures and the quest for individuality in the face of mass society. In a way, this measure is the sum of the previous five. If the gamers were perceived as hard-working and productive, they would be part of the mainstream and well-regarded, but in this particular setting, they are not. As a result, gamers are evaluated negatively as rejecting the mainstream work ethic norms. If gamers owned the building they use, they would be more invested in mainstream norms of ownership, but they do not own it, they use it as a territory. If Olympic Cards & Comics were to shut down, the gamers would be more likely to find another territory than to build or purchase their own structure in which to meet and play games. If they were homogenous in their class background or exclusionary to other classes, they would be embracing the larger social system, but in rejection of the social system they transcend class divisions and operate without regard to their class backgrounds. Gamers participate in their hobbies outside the domestic sphere, rejecting the socialization of the home. When they go to Olympic Cards & Comics, gamers are free to reject social standards of dress and appearance. They use their clothes and accessories to make statements against conformity and the pressure to be 'normal.' Gamers reject the alienation so common in urban environments. They use the game store as a way to overcome isolation and to experience community.

Alternatives to Subculture

What if gamers at Olympic Cards & Comics were not a subculture? What else might they be? Milton Yinger writes of the distinction between *subculture* and *contraculture*, also called counter-culture. He says that the use of the word subculture indicates conflict with the values of a dominant society, but in contraculture, conflict with the dominant culture is the dominant element (Yinger, 1960, p. 629). Subculture stands alone, but contraculture can only be understood in relation to the values of the dominant culture. In this case, an example of contraculture would be homosexuality. Current American social values do not condone homosexuality, nor protect many of the rights of homosexuals. If America were to embrace homosexuality, the contraculture's values would no longer be in conflict and it would no longer need to be understood as a contraculture. The gamers at Olympic Cards & Comics have tension with the social norms of appearance and productivity, but if mainstream adopted leisure values, the subculture would still exist independently as a group of people who have come together over a common interest in games, comics and fandom; therefore, they are not a contraculture.

The gamers at Olympic Cards & Comics could also be a community. Communities such as neighborhoods or parishes have strong geographic boundaries and the gamers of Olympic Cards & Comics are very specifically bound to one geographical area: the store. In *Subcultures: Cultural Histories*, Gelder (2007) elaborates on the concepts of *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gelleschaft* (society), which were originally introduced by Ferdinand Tonnies in 1887 (p. 25). According to Tonnies, the bonds of *Gemeinschaft* create a stronger, more cohesive unit that is usually based on family and kinship ties or fellowship and cooperation. It is an expression of locality such as a neighborhood or rural life. Tonies describes *Gemeinschaft* as organic, emotional, collective, cooperative, and local (Gelder, 2007, p. 25). The term *Gelleschaft* applies to a group of

people who choose to associate together out of self-interest. Tonnies describes *Gelleschaft* as rational, contractual, individualistic, competitive, mechanical, and impersonal (Gelder 2007, p. 25).

If the gamers at Olympic Cards & Comics fell into the *Gemeinschaft* category, they would have relationships that include each other's families and they would care, protect, and provide for one another. They would join together out of emotional need to support and be supported by their community. However, the gamers at Olympic Cards & Comics are not a strong, cohesive unit that operates on emotional ties of fellowship, nor do they employ kinship bonds. The gamers at Olympic Cards & Comics seek each other's companionship out of self-interest for their own hobbies and leisure. Their time together in the store is structured around the dictates of their game genre. Certainly, they have select friendships within this group of gamers, but complete strangers may compete against one another on any given evening and not necessarily form bonds on a *Gemeinschaft* level. Therefore, the traditional concept of *Gemeinschaft* does not apply to them and they remain a subculture instead of a community.

Conclusion

The gamers at Olympic Cards & Comics have created a vibrant subculture of gaming, the pursuit of the hobby, and social ties. They have come together over common interests and values to fulfill each of Gelder's six traits of subculture. The subculture is a result of conflict with mainstream values of conformity and emphasis on hard work and abandonment of 'childish' pursuits. The gamers at Olympic Cards & Comics have created their subculture as a way to deal with the alienation of being different and having different values – the values of fandom. Within this subculture, they find a sense of belonging and a place where they can develop an identity congruent with how they view themselves in contrast to how mainstream society views them.

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