

The Consumption of Food at Video Game Events

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ABSTRACT

This paper develops the discussion from a completed ethnographic PhD thesis (Law 2016); it draws on the data gathered from interviews, focus groups and participant observations to consider the consumption of food at video game events. To date, there is still little empirical research conducted on video gamers that attend various video game events; in particular, the relationship between the consumption of food at video game events. Though it was not the intention of the research to explore the consumption of food amongst video gamers, the subsequent analysis of this data highlighted patterns in relation to the consumption of food amongst male and female gamers at video game events. This paper argues that the consumption of food provided a social significance to connect gamers together through ritual practices, such as eating and drinking together – which little has been explored within games studies.

Keywords

Video games, events, food, consumption, video gamer culture

INTRODUCTION

This paper develops the discussion from a completed ethnographic PhD thesis (Law 2016); it draws on the data gathered from interviews, focus groups and participant observations to consider the consumption of food at video game events. The original purpose of this research was to consider the social significance of video gaming and its culture away from the video game screen, in particular, to those that attend various video game events across the United Kingdom - findings from this research are considered elsewhere (Law 2016). However, this paper will focus more specifically on the consumption of food from the data gathered and offer some explanations for these.

The origins of video games date back to the late 1970s and 1980s, where it began to develop as a common leisure activity. The rising popularity of video games began during the popularity of arcade-based games (such as Space Invaders) and home-based consoles (such as Atari) and computers. Today, video games have become a major global leisure industry. For instance, more games are sold in the US and UK than books (Bryce and Rutter 2001), DVD and music sales combined, and cinema box office takings (Chatfield 2009). With the rising popularity of video games, there has also been a rise in popularity of video game events. Video game events have become a popular form of social activity, which consist of a wide range of activities dedicated to the world of video games. These are real time events where people meet face-to-face to share their interest in video games and collaborate together in a meaningful way.

To date, there is still little empirical research conducted on video gamers that attend various video game events; in particular, the relationship between the consumption of food at video game events. Though it was not the intention of the research to explore the consumption of food amongst video gamers, the subsequent analysis of this data highlighted patterns in relation to the consumption of food amongst male and female gamers at video game events.

These findings support the assertion of video gamers and their stereotypical intake of junk food, leading to obesity and health problems. For instance, Pentz et al. (2011) longitudinal study (which consists of three waves of measurement; with a six month follow-up, and an 18-month follow up) suggests that the intake of high fat, high sugar snack food and beverages, and video gaming (as part of sedentary behavior) has been shown to be a significant risk factor for obesity amongst a sample of 964 fourth grade children over 18 months. This suggests that attention continues to be focused primarily on the diet of the stereotypical gamer that has often been viewed rather negatively (e.g. unhealthy and overweight). However, focusing solely on the consumption of food amongst video gamers often reinforces the stereotypical view of an anti-social gamer within popular culture, and we learn little about the cultural and social significance through the consumption of food, in particular at video game events and the significance of ritual practices. This suggests an importance to explore the unique and multivarious food ways of all cultures on their own grounds and without prejudice (Lupton 1996). Hence, this paper provides a consideration in the participation of food consumption at video game events amongst video gamers. This paper argues that the consumption of food provides a social significance to connect gamers together through ritual practices, such as eating and drinking together - which little has been explored within games studies.

This paper does not aim to provide a broad generalisation for all gamers, but rather a consideration towards the patterns of food consumption, and highlights the importance of identity relations in constructing and shaping the complex position that video gamers occupy at video game events.

CONSIDERING FOOD

Beardsworth and Keil (1997) suggest that there are two basic routes through which the study of food and eating is being incorporated into the mainstream of sociology. The first of these involves the analysis of food production and consumption through the underlying dimensions of social differentiation (such as gender, age and class) in the experiences of everyday life (Beardsworth and Keil 1997). The second of these routes involves the reverse of the first. For instance, instead of food-related social processes being investigated as a means to the particular sociological end, food-based topics can become ends in themselves, ‘...that is, specific questions can be asked about how we obtain, share, select, prepare and eat our food, and how we allocate meaning to what we are doing’ (Beardsworth and Keil 1997, p. 5), of which we then apply theories to attempt to understand what is going on. Therefore, the concept of consumption is used in different ways in the social sciences. Psychologists frequently equate food consumptions with ‘food intake’ or what we eat; whereas economists tend to equate consumption with purchase or what we buy (Stephoe et al. 1998). However, such approaches only give a partial picture of the range of practices that might be included in consuming food. Furthermore, by equating the foods we eat with the foods we choose, such approaches ignore the material, cultural and social constraints that might limit our ‘freedom to choose’ (Warde and Martens 1998). Therefore, the intake of food is an escapable physiological necessity. For instance, Beardsworth and Keil (1997, p. 6) suggest that eating entails far more than its basic physiological dimensions; ‘...the act of eating lies at the point of intersection of a

whole series of intricate physiological, physiological, ecological, economic, political, social and cultural processes'. Hence, it is important to consider the new ways of thinking about the apparently mundane, everyday act of eating, through the exploration of the habits and choices, preferences and aversions amongst individuals in their broader cultural and social contexts (Beardsworth and Keil 1997).

In relation to video games, most people are familiar with the stereotypical overweight, introverted gamer and their affinity for take-out pizza and assorted junk foods; '...mainstream texts typically deride the gaming experience as a sedentary activity that demands gamers spend hours of their day sitting in a chair, hunched over a computer or TV screen during which time many of these individuals subsist on quick, high-calorie snacks' (Cronin and McCarthy 2011, p. 721). Despite the popularity of video games, the dominant representation of video gamers in the mass media has often been rather negative. Writing in *The Telegraph*, Boris Johnson (2006, p.1) suggests that video games could be derided as 'junk culture' that reduces their players; 'to blinking lizards, motionless, absorbed, only the twitching of their hands showing they are still conscious. These machines teach them nothing'. The media has often represented video games to be an isolating activity where gamers are sat glued to their video game consoles, producing a new generation of 'couch potatoes' (Crawford 2005). For instance, Chaput et al. (2011) study on 22 normal-weight adolescents between 15 and 19 years of age (mean \pm SD age: 16.7 ± 1.1 y) found that a single session of video game play is associated with an increase of food intake, regardless of appetite sensations. The study suggest that the teenagers spent more energy playing video games than relaxing; but their food intake was more than compensated for the energy burned that day; '...the clinical implication of an energy surplus of 335kJ (80kcal) in spontaneous food intake after 1 hour of video game play is not trivial and may contribute to the energy gap underlying obesity' (Chaput et al. 2011, p. 1200). Consequently, the extra calories could be even greater with increased hours spent on video games in a day and intake of junk food during game play – similar to the increase of food intake regardless of appetite sensations when watching television (Temple et al. 2007). Although, it is important to highlight that Chaput et al. (2011) study does not blame video games for childhood obesity, and that it is just one factor in the overall picture.

However, little attention has been given to how food is used within consumer subcultures to convey identities or communities amongst like-minded individuals. This suggests an importance to consider the food related aspects of these consumers game-playing experiences, how food fits into the lives of video gamers and the kinds of meaning-based food practices that video gamers are engaged within video game events. For instance, Cronin and McCarthy's (2011) ethnographic study explores the complexity of social food consumption behaviour of one particular micro group of consumer culture, the video games subculture. Their findings suggest that the social gaming ritual, when intersected with food, is closely linked to issues of identity, community, fantasy and escape, gustatory, rebellion and prolonged hedonism. In the findings, Cronin and McCarthy (2011, p. 728-729) identify four major themes to understand how food is used to create identity and community for gamers during core rituals;

- 1) *communitas*: interplay between food and social gameplay relations
- 2) 'an excuse' – a hedonic escape
- 3) *rebellion*: subversion of mainstream culture's food norms'; and
- 4) *food* as subcultural capital

Firstly, Cronin and McCarthy (2011) refer communities to the feelings of connection and solidarity in a group – such as the feelings of linkage, belonging and devotion. Within popular culture, ‘video gaming’ is represented to be a socially isolating and solitary activity. However, it has been argued that video games can foster and enhance social relations (Brown and Bell 2004). Cronin and McCarthy’s (2011) study suggest that gaming events are a ‘social bonding ritual’ celebrated through the necessary presence of food, which consists of sharing food, playfully utilising food symbolically as a form of ‘trophy’ or ‘reward’ and consuming food while watching games (similar to consuming food at the cinema or in front of a television). Their data also suggests evidence of eating of more, but also the consumption of more junky foods than would be eaten privately; ‘...it is apparent that gamers eat more junk foods in the company of other gamers’ (Cronin and McCarthy 2011, p. 730).

Secondly, Cronin and McCarthy (2011) refer ‘an escape’ to the justification for eating in excuses or perform what could be described as ‘binge-eating’. Their study suggests that the social food consumption reflected a drive for pleasure and an opportunity to ‘cut loose’ from their ‘ordinarily’ life – in particular, an escape from their regular diet. Food is particularly potent at creating a hedonic experience for consumers, or at least contributing to one (Rozin 2005). The term hedonic refers to ‘having to do with pleasure’. For example, Khan et al. (2005) argue it is hedonism that enables consumers to choose a rich creamy Haagen Daz ice cream for dessert instead of a healthy but perhaps less tasty bowl of fruit. In relation to social gaming events, Cronin and McCarthy (2011) study showed that most informants elicited ‘junk foods’ or ‘fast foods’ as the preferred staple diet within these environments.

Thirdly, Cronin and McCarthy (2011) refer ‘rebellion’ to the elicited escape from their regular diet. For instance, during childhood, parents often teach their children certain habits and norms; such as the option for more fruits and vegetables, rather than junk food. Johnston’s (1999, p. 199) study suggests that parents are concerned with the food choices their children make during school meals; ‘...a lot of parents, in particular the mothers, worried that in the main the children were likely to opt for the pizza, chips, burger type of food’. Consequently parents often felt they were ‘going on’ about food and health issues to teach their children certain habits and norms; ‘Mum going on’, or ‘she’s always telling us “lean this” and “lean that”.....’ and ‘..... “don’t eat this” and “don’t eat that”.....’ (Johnston 1999, p. 203). However, Cronin and McCarthy (2011, p. 732) suggests the rejection of parent’s habits and norms is a form of rebellion; in particular, eating things that are labelled ‘bad’ for you; ‘...so the gaming subculture’s affinity for junky, greasy, fat food may be a communal representation of this gastronomic rebellion’. For example, their observations evidenced a form of ‘speed eating’, which refers to; ‘...a fast rate of movement or action when young people put food into the mouth, chew and swallow, in order to finish their food as fast as possible’ (Chitakunye and Maclaran 2008, p. 219). According to Cronin and McCarthy (2011), ‘speed eating’ defies traditional table manners that parents and popular consumer culture itself may encourage. Instead, this served as a purpose for video gamers to ensure them from missing out on valuable gameplay while they feed.

Finally, subcultural capital refers to the way in which identity and social distinction are formed within subcultures through the assessment of social interactions and symbolic goods against a set of group-specific values (Thornton 1995). Cronin and McCarthy’s (2011) study suggests that certain rules and norms of food solidify the consumer’s place in the subculture. They suggest that not knowing how to eat properly is universally a sin of ‘outsider status’ – in particular, not confirming to the stereotypical ‘gamer foods’ (Lupton 1996). Food itself is a term which makes a cultural distinction between acceptable and non-acceptable organic matter for human

consumption. In relation to video game events, Cronin and McCarthy (2011) study suggest that food is a marker of inclusion within the gaming subculture and expression of internalised identities.

The observations within Cronin and McCarthy's (2011) study implies some centrality of food in social events, however such observations have been infrequent in the literature. For instance, Mäyrä (2008) suggest that gamers frequently socialise at 'LAN parties' which consist of participants bringing their computers or gaming consoles over to each other's house to host and play multiplayer games between which they establish a local area network (LAN). Meanwhile, Taylor (2006, p. 59) discusses the emergence of gamer guilds – small offline venues for online players to meet each other, most of which are organised by gamers themselves and '...usually revolve around eating, socialising over drinks and reminiscing and talking about the game'. This suggests an importance to explore the consumption of food in relation to video game events.

In relation to food, eating, drinking and deciding what to eat are amongst the most frequent behaviors of any given group of consumers. Everyone consumes food on a daily basis, whether it is a mundane practice carried out alone or during special occasions amongst a small group. For instance, there are mundane practices of consuming food, as well as consuming food in the company of others which can promote a sense of belonging, where the politics of inclusion and exclusion play a central role (Cronin and McCarthy 2011). For some, consuming food together (also known as commensality) can provide explanations towards reinforcing and creating social relations and social ties (Kerner et al. 2015). Clarke (1997, p. 154) suggests that how we make use of food is a way of 'establishing relationships and social positions'. This suggests that it is important to explore how the foods we eat are not simply an expression of individual tastes but have a wider basis in class cultures and lifestyles. For instance, Ashley et al. (2004, p. 59) suggests that, '...tastes are not simply a reflection of our identity but work to construct our cultural identity: we may be what we eat, but what we eat also produces who we are'. This suggests that food choices can communicate aspects of a person's identity or emotion in ways that words cannot do alone (Hauck-Lawson 2004).

Hence, this paper provides a consideration towards a social aspect through the consumption of food at video game events – where it provides a unique opportunity for social gatherings where gamers, who are usually separated by distance, come together (sometimes over several days) to share their interest in videogames (Taylor and Witkowski 2010).

THE RESEARCH

This paper draws on data gathered from interviews, focus groups and participant observations. The original research consists of 20 interviews (20 participants), 10 focus groups (30 participants) and field notes from various video game events; from video game conventions and exhibitions, LAN events, competitions and tournaments, video game related musical events and social gatherings. The video game events include EuroGamer, MCM Comic Con, Insomnia Gaming Festival, Play Expo, Super Smash Bros. Melee tournaments (nationals and regionals) and Manchester Battle Arena events.

Relying solely on a convenience sample of video gamers that attend various video game events does provide a skewed sample in respect of age, ethnicity and social class. For instance, though the age of respondents in the sample range from 18 to 34, 10 percent of these were between the ages of 18 and 21, 60 percent of these were between the ages 22-25 and 60 percent of these were 26 and above. It is also notable

that nearly 60 percent of respondents indicated their ethnicity as ‘white’, and 70 percent of respondents indicated their gender as ‘male’. Thus, it is questionable whether the results gathered are representative towards the general population. However, it is important to consider that the majority of empirical studies on patterns of gaming rely largely on sample groups of children, who still live in their family home (Crawford and Gosling 2005). These studies often affiliate children to their unhealthy lifestyle, in-take of ‘junk-food’ and risk of obesity. A recent survey conducted from Entertainment Software Association (2020) suggests that the average age range of a video game player is between 35-44 years old. Hence, sampling a group of gamers that attend video game events (above the age of 18 years old) provides the opportunity to consider adults, in a situation where the majority of these will have moved away from their family homes for the first time, and to assess, if gaming patterns previously noted in children carry on into adult life.

CONSUMPTION OF FOOD

This section will explore the findings that highlight the patterns in the consumption of food amongst gamers at video game events. In particular, it will draw on interviews, focus groups, participant observations and field notes from various video game events. Though it was not the intention of the research to seek the consumption of food amongst video gamers, as a researcher that engaged herself into various video game events and video game practices, the consumption of food became a patterned observation from the data gathered - I have experienced eating alone in a corner, ordering food to my BYOC desk, eating together in a group, assigned the role of a ‘food runner’, prepared food in the kitchen for other gamers as a volunteer (for local Super Smash Bros. Melee events), starved during tournaments as a competitive player, indulged on snacks, survived on pot noodles and tasted victory meals. The research data gathered for this paper suggest that video gamers often consumed junk food, energy drinks and alcohol. Although this supports the stereotypical representation of an unhealthy overweight gamer, as stated earlier, it is important to consider the food related aspects of these consumers game-playing experiences; from how food fits into gamers lives and the kinds of meaning based food practices that video gamers are engaged within video game events. Also, this section will consider the observed behavior of gamers ‘sneaking’ food and alcohol through event security and into the event – which relates to food and drink policies that differed for various venues. Therefore, this section will explore patterns in food facilities, food sharing and commensality amongst video gamers at video game events, which could be considered to be a shared ritual practice amongst video game communities.

Food Facilities

From the research observations, food facilities differed depending on certain video game events. There were two types of video game events, ‘specific time events’ and ‘overnight events’.

‘Specific time events’ referred to video game events that facilitated attendees during certain opening hours without in-door/out-door sleeping areas; these included Eurogamer, MCM Comic Con and Play Expo that provided local resources; from on-site vending machines, food stalls and nearby shops, pubs and restaurants; and accommodation facilities either consisting of booking their own hotel or hostel or travelling via public transport or private vehicles. These events were often located within exhibition centers with a ‘food and drinks prohibited’ policy, such as the Royal Victoria Docks (London), Earls Court Exhibition Centre (London) and Event City (Manchester) – within these venues there were local amenities and several exhibitors that sell various exclusive items; such as games, merchandise, accessories and consumables.

‘Overnight events’ referred to video game events that offered additional facilities for attendees after opening hours with in-door/outdoor sleeping areas – although there were some events that consisted of both facilities for different members of the public (Insomnia Gaming Festival provided several ticket options from ‘Day Visitor Tickets’, which included exhibition entry, main stage access and feature zones, while ‘BYOC Tickets’ also included evening entertainment, access to indoor sleeping area (+£20 per person) or weekend camping (+£20 per person), console esports tournaments, BYOC tournament entry, seat in the LAN gaming halls and free car parking). ‘Overnight events’ that provided additional facilities for attendees after opening hours with in-door/out-door sleeping areas included Insomnia Gaming Festivals and Smash UK national events – the duration of these events often occurred over several days (between 2-4 days). Insomnia Gaming Festival (2014-2015) often provided facilities from a 24-hour tuck shop, microwaves, fridges, free hot water and food deliveries to BYOC (bring your own computer) desks through venue catering. Meanwhile, the Super Smash Bros. Melee national and regional events provided the facilities of a fully equipped kitchen, of which either involved self-catering or volunteers (often the Smash players’ wives and girlfriends – nicknamed as ‘swags’) preparing food for the gamers throughout the duration of the event.

Although food facilities differed depending on certain video game events, it is also important to highlight that little research have focused on the decisions made by event organisers who design the events. For instance, Brown and James (2004, p. 59) argues that: ‘design is essential to an event’s success because it leads to improvement of the event on every level’. Also, Getz (2012) suggests an emphasis for creativity and uniqueness in event design, by incorporating the rituals and symbols of the host community – such as sensory stimulations at events, including light, colour, sound aesthetics, smell, over-stimulation or complexity, attraction gradients, taste and touch. This suggests that sensory ethnography may be a useful methodological approach towards video game events - these findings were considered in the completed PhD thesis (Law 2016).

Eating In Excess

From the findings, several participants often considered video game events with no accommodation to be ‘day trips’, in comparison to video game events with accommodation to be ‘mini holidays’; ‘I’m on LAN holiday’ (Field notes – Insomnia Gaming Festival i54). Similar to aspects of a holiday, Clarke and Critcher (1995) suggest that a ‘real holiday’ is not spent at home, but requires a change of environment within ‘a special sort of time’, which replaces the rhythms of paid and domestic work obligations with potential choice over the use of time;

Time and place: two of the constraints of everyday life from which the holiday offers relief. Another is self-restraint, replaced by self-indulgences. The pay-off for the saving of innumerable yesterday is to spend as if there were no tomorrow. Food and drink are consumed to excess, known as trivia purchased and treasured for their worthlessness. For a couple of weeks life is a funfair... (Clarke and Critcher 1995, p. 60)

The findings suggest that food and drink were consumed in excess amongst attendees at ‘overnight events’ as a form of escape, which reflects a drive for pleasure and an opportunity to ‘cut loose’ from their ‘ordinary life’ (Cronin and McCarthy 2011). For instance, several participants mentioned that their consumption of food differed when they went to video game events, in comparison to their ‘regular diet’ in everyday lives.

Interviewee: Teemo (Insomnia Gaming Festival i50)

Yeah, I've eaten nothing but shit this weekend... kebabs, pizza, burgers... and more burgers... I can't wait till I get home and finally have a proper home-cooked meal...

The interviewee, 'Teemo' identified their affiliation of an unhealthy weekend and was looking forward to a 'proper home-cooked meal'. Notions of 'a proper meal' are often linked to nutrition, at a table, shared and promotes sociality and talk (Ashley et al. 2004). Charles and Kerr (1988, p. 23) suggest a proper meal refers to a 'social occasion' where all the family sit down together and there is conversation: it is therefore 'defined by the social relationship within which it is prepared, cooked and eaten'. For example, Murcott's (1995) study in South Wales suggests that a proper meal was equated with meat, potatoes, vegetables and gravy. In comparison, eating out is the 'exotic other' of eating at home (Ashley et al. 2004). For instance, Hardyment's (1995, p. 193) survey of food consumed in Britain, estimated that 'meals consumed out of the time' constitutes almost half of the average household's meal occasions'. In relation to video game events, it was common for gamers to 'eat-out', whether if it was food purchased at local supermarkets, takeaways or restaurants. In relation to food and cultural studies, most people in the UK eat out at least occasionally (Ashley et al. 2004). The Mintel Marketing Intelligence (1999) report 'Eating Out Review' concluded that 5 percent of the British population has experiences eating out and/or purchasing takeaway food. Also, Ashley et al. (2004) suggest it is apparently not possible to survive for more than a 'very short time without snacking' and that any commercial enterprise of any size today would appear to need to offer some form of sustenance. As mentioned earlier, videogame events often provide food facilities, from microwaves, fridges, on-site food-stalls and so on. However, within a videogame event packed with various activities, such as tournaments, competitions, game demonstrations, workshops, signing sessions and so on, the decision of what to eat can sometimes be puzzling. For instance, the interviewee, 'Pac-Man' suggest that their consumption of food became complex to maintain in comparison to their 'normal' everyday lives - to the extent where a 'balanced diet' can be significantly reduced in order to 'grab something quick'.

Interviewee: Pac-Man (Play Expo Manchester 2013)

Oh no, I don't always eat like this... when I'm home... I usually have pasta and salad... like... I had burger and chips earlier because it was just something quick and convenient...

Therefore, many video gamers will simply consume nothing but 'junk food' and energy drinks [See Figure 1].



Figure 1: A photograph of a gamer's dinner (Insomnia Gaming Festival i53)

However, it is important to highlight that the consumption of food at video game events mostly evolved around the choice of activity; it depended on certain roles within that context, either visiting the exhibition hall, exhibiting merchandise, queuing to play game demonstrations, entering a tournament or competition, cosplaying, working or volunteering and many more. For instance, Luomala et al. (2017) suggest that protein food, coffee and alcohol were most valued by competitive players whereas the convenience of snack products seem especially relevant to immersive players. This suggests a pattern of food consumption for practical purposes, rather than stereotypical ‘unhealthy’ food choices.

Overall the facilities of food differed depending on various variables; from type of event, the audience, facilities available, location and so on. For instance, Insomnia Gaming Festival changed venues between i50 to i54, from Telford International Centre to Coventry Ricoh Arena to Birmingham NEC. However, despite these changes, observational research suggests gamers planned their consumption of food and drinks accordingly, from bringing their own food and drinks depending on the facilities available (such as microwave meals and food that can last up to four days at room temperature), as well as ‘sneaking’ in prohibited beverages (alcohol) to save money on ‘extortion priced items’ at convention centers (such as water costing more than a bottle of Coke – from field notes). For example, in the terms and conditions for Insomnia Gaming Festivals (2018), it states; ‘no alcohol is to be brought onto the venue site’. Similar rules apply to music festivals due to license issues, however, there have been reports of music fans burying alcohol weeks before the festival to avoid expected mark-up of alcohol prices (Petter 2017). In relation to video game events, there was evidence of alcohol also being ‘snuck in’ from gamers hiding alcohol premixed with various bottles of soda or disguised as ‘water’, hiding alcohol in hidden compartments of bags and suitcases, as well as hiding alcohol in PC cases (which requires preparations to secure properly and retrieved later) – although all belongings are searched upon entry into the BYOC hall, some get confiscated, while some slip through the security guards. This may suggest a pattern of food consumption amongst gamers from different class backgrounds – video game events can be quite costly, from tickets, travel, accommodation and food (which often gets taken for granted) – these are all important factors that may influence the consumption choices of gamers at video game events. Despite the availability of various food facilities, the choice of food consumption amongst video gamers needs to be explored further.

Eating Together

Eating is an everyday activity that we often take for granted. Debates about eating have raised a range of questions that are central in understanding food cultures. In particular, it has raised questions about the role of food practices in producing, and reproducing the home, the family, gendered identities and the relationship between public and private spheres (Ashley et al. 2004).

What we eat, where we get it, how it is prepared, when we eat and with whom, what it means to us – all these depend on social [and cultural] arrangements (DeVault 1991, p. 35)

For instance, food offerings were common amongst video gamers. The researcher herself has been offered several items of food; from pieces of fruit, crisps, biscuits, cakes, sandwiches, energy drinks and alcohol. Using Bauman’s (2003) work, ‘City of Fears, City of Hopes’, Bauman suggests that newcomers are strangers to the city;

Strangers tend to appear ever more frightening as they become increasingly alien, un-familiar and incomprehensible, and as the mutual communication which could eventually assimilate their ‘otherness’ to one’s own life-world fades, or never takes off in the first place (Bauman 2003, p. 33)

Bauman (2003) suggests that strangers within a town or a village were not allowed to stay strange for long and become ‘familiarised’ – so that they could join the network of relationships the way the established city dwellers do: in personal mode. Despite being a stranger, and a newcomer at Insomnia Gaming Festival events, the gamers identified the researcher to be part of their community within a video gamer culture within the duration of the four-day event. For instance, the photograph below illustrates the interaction between the researcher and a gamer sat next to her BYOC (bring your own computer) desk at Insomnia Gaming Festival i53 – the gamer offered to make the researcher a sandwich, using the contents in the box, along with other snacks and beverages [See Figure 2].



Figure 2: A photograph of my neighbors ‘food supply’ (Insomnia Gaming Festival i53)

Although most of these items were high-calorie snacks, it is important to highlight that food offerings could be considered as a form of identity between ‘us’ and ‘them’ – where social ties and bonds within a community can also be intersected with food. Similarities and differences define identity categories, and without ‘them’ there cannot be an ‘us’ (Woodward 2000).

...we recognize ourselves by what we eat and what we share. Any event, any social celebration usually relies on the sharing food that is more or less ritualised. Alliances are sealed, we rediscover ourselves, peace is made with the food that we share (Bricas 2013, p. 1)

This suggests that the identity of individuals and the cohesion of communities are built through food. Therefore, this supports Cronin and McCarthy’s (2011) claim that food is a marker of inclusion within the gaming subculture and expression of internalised identities.

Another pattern amongst video gamers in relation to food consist of sharing food and eating food together. This form of ‘eating together’ is known as commensality; which involves eating and drinking together in a common physical or social setting (Kerner et al. 2015). Commensality is the essence of food, and commensal acts are essential for the integration of a society;

Food is tasty only because of the pleasure derived from eating it in good company or of knowing that eating with the right company confers social distinction (Freedman 2007, p. 15)

Everyday commensality has an important role in this reinforcement as it consists of the sharing of food, conversation, and the exchange of body-language between the participants. People do not just feast – and much more frequently – take part in everyday meals that are eating in the company of a particular set of commensal partners. In mundane meals, as well as in special meals, the politics of inclusion and exclusion play a central role. In particular, the politics of inclusion and exclusion becomes evident with Cronin and McCarthy's (2011) notion of rebellion and food as subcultural capital. For instance, from the field notes, there were moments during the video game event where the researcher was considered as an 'outsider':

Field notes – Insomnia Gaming Festival i53

As a researcher who is lactose-intolerant, I seem to have been deemed as an 'outsider' for not conforming to stereotypical food intakes; such as pizza – instead, I was given a nickname of 'Salad Queen' when purchasing a chicken Caesar salad amongst a group of gamers who ordered pizza together.

In relation to gender and food consumption, people's consumption practices are often underpinned by taken-for granted assumptions that 'heavy' foods such as steak are masculine and 'light' foods such as salad are feminine (Lupton 1996). Ashley et al. (2004) suggests that these gendered tastes are culturally constructed, where they are experienced as 'natural' because they have become 'commonsense' and are embodied as they are reproduced through practice. Hence, within a public gaming environment with a high presence of male gamers, the food consumption practices were often catered towards 'masculine' tastes; including burgers, chips, hotdogs and 'Wizzo's creamy goodness' (a running Insomnia Gaming Festival joke of the founder and whippy ice cream).

In addition, as mentioned earlier, Cronin and McCarthy (2011) suggest that not conforming to the stereotypical 'gamer foods' can be considered to be a sin of 'outsider status' – in particular, not confirming to the gaming subculture's affinity for junky, greasy, fat food (and cheese) and communal representation of rebellion. For example, Cronin and McCarthy (2011) investigated the food politic of the gaming subculture by providing celery sticks and fruit juices to a home console night. Consequently, jokes were instantly made with comments to the researcher to observe 'a hard-core gaming party, not the minutes of a vegan meeting' and to 'leave that stuff outside for the birds' (Cronin and McCarthy 2011, p. 735). Similarly, from the field notes, the researcher also had a similar experience when she brought carrot cake;

Field notes – Insomnia Gaming Festival i53

Person sat next behind me:	Oooo... what have you got there? Hope it isn't one of your salads again! *laughs*
Researcher:	No, but would you like one?
Person sat next behind me:	What is it? I don't eat anything green...
Researcher:	It's carrot cake
Person sat next behind me:	Yeah... I don't eat carrots either... or anything healthy... you're at a LAN event... you're not meant to eat stuff like that...

This form of rebellion to eat things that are bad at a LAN event suggests an embodied experience amongst video gamers. For instance, Bell and Valentine (1997, p. 125) refer to restaurant dining as a total consumption package – not just food and drink,

but the whole ‘experience’. This suggests that the atmosphere is arguably important in promoting the restaurant as if the food itself – and video game events are no exception – where video gamers eat junk food in the company of other gamers and ‘embrace LAN’.

Using Jonsson and Verhagen’s (2011) concept of embodiment and video gamers at video game events, they suggest that playing video games is not about getting rid of the body, it is also about the corporeal and embodiment experience. Although Jonsson and Verhagen (2011) does not directly refer to the five senses, it can be used as a useful tool to understand the embodied experience at video game events.

TOUCH: physical presence of video gamers

TASTE: energy drinks and junk food

SMELL: body odour and warm machines

SOUND: conversations and controllers

FEEL: emotion and sense of community

In relation to food culture, Jonsson and Verhagen (2011) suggest that taste and smell can be perceived as a fundamental domain of cultural expression where the values and practices of a society are enacted. Their comparative analysis between food culture and people’s eating habits in a game café and Dreamhack suggest both traits of similarity and differences.



Figure 3: A photograph of a tower made from energy drinks (Insomnia Gaming Festival i53)

For example, Jonsson and Verhagen (2011) suggest that energy drinks, with high caffeine content, was commonly consumed by young people in Sweden – this was also common amongst young people in the UK (See Figure 3). They identified that energy drinks consumed within a gaming café were used for recreational purposes; ‘...to stress off and relax than for sensational experience and to party’ (Jonsson and Verhagen 2011, p. 7). In comparison, energy drinks consumed within Dreamhack was commonly used to ‘...endure the four day event, to be able to stay awake... and not

go to sleep' (Jonsson and Verhagen 2011, p. 7). Similarly, Taylor's (2006) provides a comparable finding with her study at Dreamhack, where certain tastes can be characterised by certain cultural markers – such as eating fast food and drinking energy drinks to give players quick energy that can be consumed instantly and does not interfere game play. Therefore, this supports Cronin and McCarthy's (2011) suggestion that food itself is a term which makes a cultural distinction between acceptable and non-acceptable organic matter for human consumption. For instance, from the field notes, the researcher received a playful 'wake-up' slap for attempting to go to bed at 1am on the first day of LAN (Insomnia Gaming Festival i53); 'No... you don't go to bed... you stay up like the rest of us and embrace LAN... here, have an energy drink' (Field notes – Insomnia Gaming Festival i53). This suggests that participating at video game events tells us something more than just what games people play. The space within video game events of 'being there' and together' provides a welcoming atmosphere with considerations to a worthwhile leisure lifestyle shared amongst gamers.



Figure 4: A photograph and eating chicken together (Insomnia Gaming Festival i50)

For example, the picture above illustrates a group of gamers eating a takeaway together [See Figure 4]. Freud (1918) suggests that eating and drinking with someone at the same time is a symbol and a confirmation of social community and of the assumption of mutual obligations.

...events in which participants act jointly may be used to communicate meaning, not only about the self, but also about the relationships amongst individuals that bind them together into a 'small world' (Cronin and McCarthy 2011, p. 730)

Commensality is about creating and reinforcing social relations (Bourdieu 1984). Moreover, these are acts that must be continually reinforced through practice; 'It's tradition to have chicken on the first day of LAN' (Field notes – Insomnia Gaming Festival i50). This suggests that social gaming rituals can be intersected with food, which can provide feelings of connection and solidarity in a group. In relation to video game communities, it can be argued that the community is 'imagined' (Anderson 2006) – video game events provide a unique opportunity for social gatherings where gamers, who are usually separated by distance, come together (sometimes over several days) to share their interest in videogames (Taylor and Witkowski 2010) - similarly, video game events also provide an unique opportunity for gamers to celebrate through the necessary presence of food. Therefore, video game events could be considered to be a 'social bonding ritual', which consists of sharing food and playfully utilising food symbolically (Cronin and McCarthy 2011).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, video game events are not just about playing video games; video gamers do spend considerable amounts of time outside the actual game, discussing and interacting in meaningful ways (Jansz and Martens 2005); which these social ties and bonds within a community can also be intersected with food. The consumption of food at video game events amongst video gamers can consist of the symbolic task of sharing and celebrating group identity through its bonding capabilities, whereby gamers experience the pleasure and consciousness from consuming food together. This suggests that the concept of taste to argue that food, like in any culture, is a strong indicator of one's place in a community.

However, the ways in which food tastes, shaped by class, gender and ethnic identities, may not remain constant over time; 'It is also necessary to be aware of how our tastes for certain foods are shaped within specific historical formations. For instance, Alan Ward identified four antinomies which 'comprise the structural anxieties of our epoch' (1997, p. 55) and frame food consumption practices and tastes – health and indulgence, economy and extravagance, care and convenience, and traditional and novelty...' (Ashley et al. 2004, p. 72). The shifting equilibrium between these antinomies is a means of mapping historical change. Consequently, due to the nature of empirical research, dissimilar findings may be observed from video game events over time.

With the rising popularity of competitive gaming and esports, large-scale competitive gaming events have attracted thousands of international players and spectators from all over the world with varied class, ethnicity, and gender identities. Hence, within this underdeveloped area of research, there is scope to explore beyond what this paper has considered.

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