HANGING OUT IN THE GAME CAFÉ
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HANGING OUT IN THE GAME CAFÉ:

Contextualising co-located computer game play practices and experiences

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To Johan, Klara-Lee and Dag
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# LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

This dissertation presents a descriptive and analytical account of the social and cultural meanings and contexts of playing computer games\textsuperscript{1} in game cafés and LAN parties. Despite the fact that playing computer games have become one of the more popular leisure activities in recent decades, engaging millions of people across the world, a great many myths, notions and assumptions still surround computer game cultures and computer game playing, which are often generated in sweeping generalisations. In the most extreme examples, the mass media have blamed computer games for the school massacres in Columbine, USA (Bryce & Rutter, 2006) and in Finland (Lindgren, 2009). Games have also been the target for a fierce media debate caused by one of the most controversial game series to date: Rockstar Game's Grand Theft Auto (Ensslin, 2012). In South Korea, gamers have made world headlines with articles concentrated on widespread video game addiction, how “real-life” social activities apparently suffer due to addictions to game parlors, and even cases of gamers’ deaths (Chee, 2006). Even though other reports and stories of computer game playing have shown up in the mass media, for example live transmissions from e-sporting events and reviews of computer games in daily newspapers, mass media reports about this topic are dominated by subjects such as acts of aggression, violence, addiction and physical passivity. Chee (2006) rightfully asks whether these extreme stories are the only possible accounts of computer game play and cultures on which we should base our perceptions. I believe the answer is no. To be able to counteract these popular stories and sweeping generalisations, in-depth studies of computer game playing are needed, which would have the power to serve as an antidote to such popular claims and assumptions.

Computer games played in game cafés and at computer festivals are notable across the world. The games that are played in these settings are usually accessed online or played over a local-network-area (abbreviated as LAN. This abbreviation will be used in the rest of this dissertation). These games support collaboration or competition between individuals and groups. In this dissertation, we will explore and investigate the significance of co-located game playing in game cafés and mass LAN parties, the meanings of co-located game playing in public for the participants of these activities and events and the meanings and motives of staying in a game café. In this work, co-located computer game playing refers to a social situation in which players are located in the same physical setting, playing online games or over a LAN.

\textsuperscript{1} In this dissertation, I will use the term ‘computer games’ for the most part of the time, since the studies deal with games played on PC computers. When the informants use other terms, such as video games, I will use theirs.
To understand co-located game-playing practices and experiences, this work engages in a discussion of the game café as a particular setting and social context and how co-located game playing is perceived, experienced and constructed. We will explore how playing co-located games in general and in game cafés and LAN parties in particular is valued and seen by those who do not directly participate in these activities and events, with a particular focus on stakeholders such as the press and parents. A focus on the representations of the mass media and parents’ attitudes is important as these shape the debate and discourses on computer game play and computer games (Ensslin, 2012). In this work, I will also engage in a discussion of the embodied experiences of co-located game playing by investigating the ways co-located game play is perceived and experienced through the senses. Up to the present, most studies of co-located game playing have explored game play as social, cultural, pedagogical and communicative practices, while ignoring the embodied notions of co-located computer game play. In a response to this lack, I will argue for the need to take into account the senses in studies of co-located computer game play.

Despite the fact that there are several studies of co-located computer game playing in game cafés and LAN parties, this social phenomenon is still under researched. Thus, this work is significant for several reasons. An empirical field study of co-located game play in public settings sheds lights on the physical and local contexts of computer game playing, which often remain hidden in studies of online game worlds. Studies of online game play limited to online settings often tend to miss the physical and embodied dimensions of game play and its connection with the wider social and cultural contexts of games such as everyday life and leisure and youth cultures. A focus on the wider context of game play has been emphasized by several researchers on games and new media. For instance, Apperley (2010) talks about gaming in game cafés as situated, material and mundane activities and media scholar Livingstone (2003) argues that we need to go beyond media effects towards the social and cultural contexts of the media use. Crawford (2012) rightfully points out that “video gaming needs to be understood not as a solitary activity that occurs only at certain isolated times and locations but rather as a culture which extends far beyond the sight of a video computer game machine or screen” (Crawford, 2012, p. 143). Game play experiences cannot be limited to intensive immersive ways of playing games (Myärä, 2007).

This work can be seen as an endeavour to go beyond popular images and sweeping generalisations about computer game playing and game cultures, by providing an in-depth field study of the social and cultural meanings and contexts of playing co-located computer games in public. Such a focus recognises the diverse and complex nature of co-located game playing and game cultures.
1.1 PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The primary field of investigation for this work is a game café in Stockholm, although mass LAN parties will be investigated, to a minor extent. The overall aim of the dissertation is to describe and analyse the social and cultural contexts and meanings of co-located public game play practices and experiences. This aim has been formulated in several questions, as follows: What practices are people involved in when staying in a game café? What does playing computer games in a game café mean for the people who are involved in these practices? What kind of social setting is the game café? What is the main activity in the game café? Who are the participants, the inhabitants of the game café? What are their roles and relationships? Why do people stay in a game café in the first place, what are their needs and motives?

The analytical focus of this work emphasises the contexts and the practices and experiences of co-located game playing. Accordingly, the analysis takes into account the social setting and contexts of playing games, the where, who and when of game play, such as the game café and the mass LAN party as well as the practices, interactions and experiences of playing games, the how of game play. Focusing on either one would be to make an analytical distinction between these two, viewing them as separate entities. In this work, the context and the practices of game play are regarded and approached as interrelated. Thus, to be able to reach an understanding of the social, cultural and spatial contexts of game play, we need to highlight and explore what and in which ways game playing activities and practices are performed and interacted. To be able to analyse and develop an understanding of co-located game playing practices and experiences we need to recognise how game playing is located and situated within certain social, cultural and spatial contexts. In this work, this has been achieved by analysing the social practices, experiences and contexts of co-located game playing in public settings and the norms, values and discourses surrounding public co-located game settings and co-located game playing.

The concept ‘third place’ developed by Ray Oldenburg (1999) is central to this work. Although Oldenburg stated that a room full of individuals intent upon playing video games is not a third place, this work will show that a game café, a place intended for playing online and network computer games with friends and peers can be seen as a third place, or has elements of a third place. However, it is important to point out that this statement is not without doubt. Rather, this statement is true only for a limited group of people. In notions of the game café as a third place, this may be true only for a limited group of people, i.e. male teenagers and young men who like to play computer games. Later in this work I will reflect on the theoretical implications of this statement. For now I will make explicit the reasons for choosing the third place as a main concept in this work, and what other competing concepts and metaphors I have taken into consideration but did not choose for further explication.
I found the idea of the third place relevant for several reasons. With the purpose of reaching an understanding of the social meanings and practices of game playing in public, I found the third place concept useful for such an analytical endeavour. The third place recognises the type of social environments located away from home and work, the particular inhabitants in a public place and the kind of social atmosphere of a public place. However, the third place was not the only concept that I took into consideration for this work. During the field study, I considered a number of other interpretations, such as the ‘playground’, the ‘sport club’ and ‘the nook’ but these proved to be too limited to reach an understanding of the public dimensions of game play. Although these terms have their strengths and weaknesses, these would put forward other aspects and ideas. The term ‘playground’ would shed light on the practices and meanings of ‘play’ while it would lack the potential to take into consideration the public characteristics of a game café. The ‘sport club’ metaphor would put forward competition, collaboration, achievements, tournaments and sport while failing to take into account the casual and recreational practices and contexts of co-located game playing. The ‘nook’ would recognise the private meanings and use of game play in which the game café would be seen as a place where game players withdraw from the rest of the world, while missing out the public performances and interactions of game playing in a game café.

The research questions have been investigated in four studies. In the first study, I explore the use and meanings of the game café as a particular setting and social context for playing co-located computer games. We investigate the participants’ use of, motives for and needs of attending and participating in a game café. This study discusses the game café as a ‘third place’. The study shows that the game café is used by the participants as a place of their own. People come there to escape from parents and school, meet and hang out with friends. In the second and third study, I take a different approach to my analytical focuses, where I focus on the notions of the senses in an understanding of the embodied experiences of co-located game play. I explore how the senses give meaning to and shape co-located game playing experiences in public and highlight how the local atmosphere provides support for particular sensory game play practices and experiences. This study shows that co-located game playing in a mass LAN party, surrounded by moving neon lights, techno music and often thousands of people gathered together in a limited space can be viewed as a ‘total’ experience, perceived through the sights, sounds, tastes, smells and touches. In the last study, we investigate and analyse the public images and discourses surrounding playing games in game cafés and mass LAN parties. In this study, I turn my attention away from the participants’ views and meanings of playing games in public, by exploring media and parents’ notions of and attitudes towards public co-located game play. This study shows that game playing in public is portrayed as a public scene for professional gamers and a place for partying by the mass media. These images counteract assumptions of computer game play as an asocial activity and violent practice. On the other hand, these representations reproduce stereotypical images of gender and youth in game cultures. Parents’ attitudes towards game playing are linked to traditional norms about children’s play in general, preferring outdoor play and do not see game playing as equal to outdoor play and of face to face interactions and social relationships.
At the beginning of the research, my interest in game cafes and mass LAN parties emerged from a curiosity to find out why people who had access to broadband and high technical computer game facilities at home chose to go to play games in a game café and/or mass LAN parties to play games. I was interested to find out the motives for going to game cafés and mass LAN parties to play computer games among those players who had the technical facilities and opportunities to play games at home. Behind this question was an assumption that playing games at home would be more ‘rational’, than playing computer games in public since money and time to a large extent restricts young people’s lives and options to leisure activities (Skelton, 1998). From this perspective, it would be more costly and time beneficial for youth to play games at home since parents pay for broadband and Internet connection at home and playing games at home requires less effort than would moving to another place. This dissertation shows that this assumption proved to be wrong. There is a range of social, cultural and emotional motives and meanings for staying and playing games in a game café, which will be presented and further discussed later in this work.

1.2 PREVIOUS WORK

1.2.1 PLACES OF CO-LOCATED GAME PLAY

This dissertation exists at the borderline of several dynamic and expanding research fields: game studies, sociology, human – computer interaction and media studies. Reflecting this, this dissertation consists of theories and concepts from a range of research fields. However, since the focus of research is on the contexts and practices of computer game play, I would position this work in the interdisciplinary field of game studies. In game studies there has been a debate whether this research field should be seen as a distinct research area drawing on perspectives and theories on play and games or whether computer games should be viewed as narratives or media texts, and drawing on media theories and literature theory (Crawford, 2012). Although this debate has formally ended, scholars still refer to these positions in an effort to position particular studies on computer games or in discussions on the identity of game studies. Based on my own research interest and the purpose of this work, this work can be described as a sociological account of the social and cultural contexts and meanings of playing computer games in public. By focusing on the contexts and meanings of computer game play, theories on play and games have proven to be too limited. Instead, I take as points of departure theories on sociality, leisure and youth cultures and media consumption since these were able to take into account the many diverse social and cultural meanings and contexts of game play. In this dissertation, I regard co-located computer game playing as a contextual experience and practice rather than merely as an outcome of the game rules or the design of games.

In this and the next section I position this work in relation to previous research on co-located game playing and public game play settings. This chapter is organised in two sections. The first section is called studies on co-located game places and the next
section is referred to as *studies on co-located game-playing practices and experiences*. These sections should not be seen as distinct research areas as there are overlaps between them. In studies of co-located game play places, game playing is often taken into account and in studies of co-located game play the social and spatial context is recognised. However, despite overlaps, there is a tendency to emphasise one over the other, the place of game play or game-playing practices and experiences.

In this section, I will highlight some of the main ideas, issues and topics that have shaped previous studies in these areas. I will also discuss the theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches, their strengths and limitations and show the ways these studies relate to each other. This review is not an attempt to be exhaustive. The selection of studies is based upon how each is related to this work. Sociological studies of Internet cafés are also included in this discussion as these studies have had an influence on the academic debate and discussions of co-located game playing in game cafés and LAN parties.

In studies on game/Internet cafés and LAN parties, the *place*, or the *localisation* of game play has been a recurrent theme and focus of analysis. This notion rests on the fact that computer game playing always takes place ‘somewhere’. In these discussions, ‘somewhere’ has been defined as the ‘space’ or ‘place’ of game playing. The relationship between notions of place and space has been a heated topic within a range of disciplines such as philosophy, urban studies, sociology and geography, to name a few. In this work, I will use the term ‘place’ when discussing the spatial and geographical locations of co-located computer game play. ‘Place’ connotes the particular and non-abstract ‘somewhere’ in contrast to space, which refers to the infinite ‘everywhere’ (Casey, 1997). A slightly different notion of place and space is put forward by Harrison and Dourish (1996). They argue that space is the physical concrete world while place is space invested with values and meanings (Harrison & Dourish, 1996).

One of the most debated and contested ideas in game studies is the concept of the ‘magic circle’ (Crawford, 2012). The ideas of the magic circle were coined by the historian Johan Huizinga in his book *Homo Ludens* (Huizinga, 1938). This term has gained special attention among game designers (Rodriguez, 2006) when discussing the beginning and the end of a game, as well as the relationship between the outer environment and the game. Huizinga’s idea of a magic circle draws on the notions that play proceeds within proper boundaries of time and space, being isolated spots with specific rules. However, as noted by Crawford, the magic circle has been popularised in contemporary game studies by Salen and Zimmerman (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). For Salen and Zimmerman, the magic circle is a useful metaphor for understanding the space where computer game play takes place (Crawford, 2012). The notions of the magic circle as an isolated space of play has been challenged by several scholars (Copier, 2005; Pargman & Jakobsson, 2008; Taylor, 2006). They note that there is not a clear-cut distinction between game space and the wider ‘real’ social world.
In a study of the social and spatial organisation of game play, the authors differentiate between three kinds of gaming spaces: public, domestic and virtual (Bryce & Rutter, 2003a, 2003b; Rutter, 2007). They argue that gaming spaces are increasingly diverse in their temporal and spatial arrangements as the activity of game playing becomes more widespread, culturally significant and technologically mobile (Bryce & Rutter, 2003a). Their constructions of game space are important as they recognise that game spaces are not only located within a virtual space but can also be viewed and approached as a public and domestic localisation. In recent years, we have seen an interest in game-playing cultures studied within massively multi-player online environments (MMORPGs) (Ducheneaut, Moore, & Nickell, 2007; Pearce & Artemesia, 2009). In particular, the social life and cultures of the MMORPGs World of Warcraft has been a popular social site for exploration. In some of these studies, virtual game worlds have been described as global networks mediated through computer technologies where new forms of game cultures and social communities emerge, where a significant number of people can interact in real time and build communities that traverse geographical and temporal boundaries. In their descriptions, place is insignificant (Pearce & Artemesia, 2009) as geographical distance collapses. A similar tendency has been found in discourses of cyberspace in which images of global connectivity promise that where is irrelevant as long as you are connected and thus part of a giant network that collapses distance into nothingness (Sundén, 2003). Sundén (2003) rightfully points out that in romantic discussions of the ‘global village’, something very important is left out, which is those differences grounded in diverse localities. In contrast to these romantic ideas of game play as dislocated, disembedded and disembodied, a core argument in this work is that computer game play experiences and practices are always situated within and connected to particular material, local, social, cultural and physical environments and locations.

While these studies provide us with insightful accounts of online game cultures, they are limited to online settings and do not recognise the social life and processes in offline game settings. However, several scholars have recognised the intimate relationships between virtual and physical game settings, by taking into account both online and offline game settings (Nardi, 2010; Taylor, 2006). It is common that these studies seek to avoid a split between dualistic notions of game places such as online and offline, real and virtual and what is ‘a game’ and is ‘not a game’. Instead, these are argued to be deeply intertwined (Taylor, 2006). In her rich ethnographic study of the MMORPG, Everquest Taylor (2006) follows and studies a guild community in both online and offline settings. Her book, with the telling title, Play Between Worlds, can be seen as an effort to put forward and complicate the localisation of game play by showing computer game play across various geographical and spatial destinations and locations. Taylor (2006) notes that people constantly move back and forth, from across the boundaries of the game and non-game and online and offline environments (Taylor, 2006).

This field study of co-located game playing is located in the social and physical place of a game café and a mass LAN party in Sweden. Therefore, this dissertation follows the studies of co-located game playing located in public settings (Chee, 2006;
In line with several other studies on Internet/game cafés and LAN parties, I approach these settings not primarily as technical or commercial sites but as public, physical, social, local, geographical and cultural spaces, sites and destinations (Liff & Steward, 2003; Stewart, 2000; Wakeford, 1999). As Stewart (2000) notes, ‘Cybercafés may reflect the communication and information needs of people living in a global society, but they place this is in a local context, providing a social space and a convenient location for technology access: the “human face” of information society’ (Stewart, 2000, p. 2).

Studies of public places of co-located game play have been located in several geographical destinations such as in Korea (Chee, 2006; Steward & Choi, 2003) China (Lindtner, et al., 2008; Liu, 2009; Sun, 2010), the Netherlands (Gajadhar, et al., 2009) and Norway (Nordli, 2003). Surprisingly, game cafés do not seem to be a common social phenomenon in North America. In the geographical landscape of LAN parties in the USA, LAN parties are often organised in dormitories or at students’ apartments (Nardi, 2010). Common to all of these studies is that they recognise the social meanings and contexts of these settings.

This work follows in the footsteps of studies on Internet and game cafés, which view these game places as ‘third places’. In these studies, the social, cultural and emotional appeals and uses of these settings are highlighted (Chee, 2006; Gajadhar, et al., 2009; Liu, 2009; Salvador, Sherry, & Urrutia, 2005). Most of these studies use a qualitative approach working with observations and/or semi-structured or focused interviews. In these studies, it has been argued that game cafés support sociability and provide spaces where people gather and meet with friends and have access to high-quality hardware (Beavis, H.Nixon, & Atkinson, 2005; Gajadhar, et al., 2009), support local communities and sociability (Liff & Steward, 2003) and are places to wind down and relax after hectic school work and examinations (Chee, 2006; Gajadhar, et al., 2009; Liu, 2009; Salvador, et al., 2005). In a study of PC bangs (literally, PC rooms) in South Korea, it was shown that traditional family structures restricted young people from gathering at home to play games and so PC bangs became sites for hanging out with friends (Chee, 2006). Game cafés have also been argued as being places for learning and literacy (Beavis, et al., 2005). In their field study of LAN cafés in Australia, Beavis, Nixon and Atkinson (2005) note that Internet cafés can be considered as rich pedagogical sites for cultural and public pedagogy, where people learn and are taught computer and social skills about how to act and be in the world. These studies are important as they show how notions of the public can complement notions of the game place. However, it is notable that none of these studies contest or critique Oldenburg’s (1999) notions of a third place. This may be because the third place is a general and broad concept, which fits on all public informal settings (more or less). It is also a normative concept as it rests on social and moral values such as community, democracy, freedom and social equality. Therefore, a third place may be useful and serve as an antidote to counteract the negative reports on game cafés and public game settings, which in the mass media are portrayed as dangerous places associated with crime and violence. On the other hand, it is important to not erase counterclaims and contradictions that do not fit
within Oldenburg's notions of a third place. What are at stake are the hidden ideas, notions and assumptions of public life and settings that are left out in Oldenburg's notion of a third place.

If the third place has been used by researchers to analyse game and Internet cafés as social settings, it is also important to highlight other terms that have been used to understand and conceptualise public game play locations. In studies of the Internet café, terms such as heterotopian sites (Liff & Steward, 2003; Liu, 2009), technosocapes (Wakeford, 2003), technosocial (Laegren & Stewart, 2003) and liminal spaces (Beavis, et al., 2005) have been proposed. It is common for these terms that they try to complicate or challenge traditional dualisms and constructions in discussions of the Internet and game play cultures such as the separation between ‘virtual’ and ‘material’, the ‘local’ and the ‘global’, ‘online’ and ‘offline’, ‘technology’ and ‘sociability’ and ‘home’ and ‘public’. These studies suggest that these oppositions cannot be talked of and constructed in any straightforward way. As noted by Wakeford (1999), the Internet can be described as social and material achievements that may combine several kinds of objects and experiences, only some of which are ‘cyber’ or ‘virtual’ in any straightforward sense.

The heterotopian site is a term that originates from Foucault (1986) and is a metaphor of the mirror, which implies the juxtaposition of the ‘absolutely real’ person and space with the ‘absolutely unreal’ virtual image and its space (Liff & Steward, 2003, p. 319). Liff and Steward (2003) argue that the cybercafé implies a heterotopian juxtaposition of the virtual world of ‘cyber’ space and the real place of the ‘café’. Liu (2009), who uses the notion of a third place in conjunction with Liff and Stewards’ (2003) discussion of the Internet café as a heterotopian site in her study of Internet cafés in China, argues that the heterotopian notion of site underscores the breaking of absolute time and highlights ‘otherness’, where the hegemonic space of society prevails. She argues that the wang ba contradicts other sites in society such as the home and the school and represents agentic strategies of youth to resist, cope with and subvert the repressions found in their socio-biographical representations (age and only child) in the social and cultural landscape of China (Liu, 2009). In her view, the conjunctions of virtual and physical place dissolve absolute time. In her view of wang bas, public place represents a utopian place and potential for resistance and for ‘otherness’ where power structures and relationships vanish out of sight. This utopian dream leaves out the way modern time perceptions and notions of time continue to shape and organise peoples' game play experiences both online and offline (Grimes & Feenberg, 2009).

In contrast to her work, this dissertation will show how power relationships and structures continue to shape public game places.

Technosocial scapes refer to the intertwining of the social, technical and spatial spaces found in Internet cafés. This concept sheds lights on the commonly held division between social and technology. Laegren and Stewart (2003) argue that the technical, social and spatial spaces are deeply intertwined in Internet cafés. Drawing on the actor-network theory, the authors argue that cybercafés are shaped by technology as well as by the users. Wakeford (2003), who draws on Appadurai’s concept of technoscape (Wakeford, 2003), argues for recognising ‘the spatial and
temporal translation of a generalised technological experience’ in the Internet café. She argues that despite the fact that cybercafés are linked to their local community and have specific local forms, it is important to look at their role in making visible the interconnections between global and local processes. Beavis et al. (2005) argue that LAN cafés are liminal spaces situated at the margins of Australian culture and located at the interface between home, school and the streets. As such, these places have a ‘liminal’ quality, and thus they are ambiguous and evolving and are not easily codified into existing categories.

In discussions of game cafés and Internet cafés, notions of ‘virtual’ and ‘real’ and local and global spaces have been a heated topic (Liff & Laegren, 2003; Miller & Slater, 2000; Swalwell, 2003). In these discussions, the virtual and real and the local and the global as distinct and separate categories have been challenged (Apperley, 2010; Miller & Slater, 2000; Wakeford, 2003). Powell (2004) argues that ‘Internet cafés are places where the global becomes local’. In a comparative study of Internet cafés in England, Laegren and Stewart (2003) distinguish between the trendy, healthy and nerdy Internet cafés. These types of game locations represent translocal images, which create locally specific spaces. According to these authors, the universal idea of the Internet café does not exist (Laegren & Stewart, 2003). Instead, ‘It is shaped by local images and social needs which shape the configuration of patrons, computers and the premises, in ways which facilitate different uses of computer in these spaces’. The global intersection with the local has also been highlighted by Taylor and Witkowski (2010). They argue that LAN parties have a strong geographical component, even if these places are an opportunity to meet people separated by distance (Taylor & Witkowski, 2010).

Notions of the division between the material and virtual have been discussed in studies of co-located game playing. In these studies, it has been argued that these distinctions are constantly crossed, transgressed and challenged by players. Swalwell (2003) notes in her study of a LAN event in Australia that playing on a LAN challenges many of the traditional assumptions of computer gaming such as being an antisocial activity as well as the materiality and reality statuses of online game playing. There is no clear distinction between the material and virtual as players constantly negotiate between these distinctions (Swalwell, 2003). Similar to her argument, Apperley (2010), in his ethnographic study of gaming in a game café in Caracas, Venezuela and a game café in Melbourne, Australia, argues that digital game play should not be understood as fantastic, virtual experiences but as situated in material and mundane reality. In this view, the everyday life of the local level shapes the global experiences of game play (Apperley, 2010).

An important theoretical contribution to works on co-located game playing situated in various game play locations consists of those perspectives called ‘ecological’. What these approaches have in common is an endeavour to bring together the virtual with the physical game place. These studies take a holistic view of game play and game places carried out in both online or offline settings, as such an approach is argued to map on the realities of players’ lives. Apperley (2010) argues for a situated ecology game perspective, which points out the collision of the rhythms of everyday life and the global rhythms of gaming, which together produce harmony. His idea
draws on Lefebvre's (1976) notions of the rhythms of space, place and everyday life. Apperley's ecology game perspective includes the global and virtual ecology of gaming and the local material condition of local gaming. In a similar vein, Lindtner et al. promote a hybrid cultural ecology perspective on game play places, which takes into account the physical environments of game cafés and the virtual spaces of World of Warcraft (Lindtner, et al., 2008).

In studies of public game places such as game cafés and mass LAN parties, notions of class has been a neglected theme, which has been neglected as a topic in game studies in general. A limited amount of work has been done on class demographics in game cafés. Qui and Liung (2005) note a class shift regarding the location of the use of the Internet. They note that the Internet is used in university campuses or in shopping malls by the elite, while Internet cafés have turned into entertainment oases for the lower classes, the 'information have-less'. In another study of Internet cafés in China, class was viewed as a factor that shaped players' choice of game location. Lindtner et al. (2008) argue that there is an identity politics implicated in players' choice of physical location, be it in dormitory, Internet café or a private entertainment club (Lindtner, et al., 2008). In their study, Lindtner et al. (2008) note that many young educated urban people in China prefer to play games at home or in dormitories as Internet cafés have become places for the lower classes. This work is important as it puts forward the idea that players' choice of game setting is not based just on communities and social relationships but is a result of class identities and politics.

Public game places have also been explored and discussed as sites subject to political ideas and governmental regulations and policies. Studies in China have recognised that the use of the Internet is linked to social, political and economic changes in this landscape (Lagerkvist, 2010; Lindtner, et al., 2008; Nardi, 2008; Qiu & Liuning, 2005). These studies have shown that public game play places are not only social, individual, commercial and leisure sites but also political sites, targets for political regulations and restrictions. For example, in a study of the Internet in China, it was shown that these places were subject to closings and police raids and control mechanisms have been installed on the computers in the Internet cafes (Lindtner & Scablewicz, 2010). Studies of wang bas (PC bars) have shown that these places have been blamed for causing Internet addiction and immorality by the state officials in China (Lindtner, 2010). Using a perspective called a hybrid cultural ecology, these take into consideration the interplay between digital and physical settings, the socio-economic, state regulations and cultural value system to understand online gaming (Lindtner, 2008). Instead of tracing the regulations of the Internet and the Internet café, Qui and Liuning (2005) argue it is a complex ecology within which local issues of the control of Internet access first become generalised from the micro social units of families, schools and the café themselves to the macro level of the mass media’s coverage and national regulation (Qiu & Liuning, 2005).

Finally, I highlight studies of place of game play that highlight gender dynamics to understand the spatial organisation of game play. These studies argue that public places of game play tend to be patriarchal spaces, dominated by men (Bryce & Rutter, 2003a). In these studies, it has been pointed out that the spatial organisation
of game play is used and structured around gender. Studies on game cafés and LAN parties have highlighted the dominance of boys and young men in these settings (Gajadhar, et al., 2009; Jansz & Martens, 2005; Kolko & Cynthia, 2008; Liu, 2009; Nardi, 2010; Stewart & Choi, 2003). Bryce and Rutter (2005) argue that the access and use of game play place is constrained, regulated and organised by gender dynamics. They argue that the concepts of leisure constraints and resistance incorporate possibilities for resistance to traditional notions of masculinity and femininity as well as their reinforcements (Bryce & Rutter, 2003a). Their work is significant and important as it takes into account the gender dynamics and relationships of computer game play in their analyses of the social and spatial organisation of games. Despite the fact that women do play games, they usually do so at home. In a study of gaming expertise and competences, Beavis (2005) conducted interviews with members of a clan consisting of young women 18 to 22 years old playing games in a game café in Melbourne for a period of six weeks. Her study suggests that the expertise of girl gamers’ does not rest on specific skills and strategies and familiarity, but is located within the complex dynamics of in- and out-school discourses and social contexts (Beavis, 2005).

1.2.2 CO-LOCATED GAME PLAYING

Sjöblom (2011) notes that most studies of game cafés have failed to take into account the practices and interactions of game playing when studying the public setting. He argues that studies of co-located game playing have focused on the cultures, practices, interactions, audiences and players. In these studies, the physical and social locations of game play have been argued as suitable contexts for the study and analyses of co-located computer game play. In this section, I will put forward how co-located game playing practices and experiences have been described and conceptualised and studied in previous studies. I will also position this work in relation to these conceptualisations and approaches.

The practices and experiences of co-located game playing have been studied in different social, cultural and geographical contexts and locations such as at home (Kambouri, 2003; McNamee, 1998), in families (Eklund, Forthcoming ), at game cafés (Chee, 2006; Gajadhar, et al., 2009), in game console clubs (Jakobsson, 2007), in mega LAN parties (Taylor & Witkowski, 2010 ), at e-sport competitions (McNamee, 1998; Rambush, Pargman, & Jakobsson, 2007; Schott & Kambouri, 2003) and community computer centres for youth (Clark, 2003). In these studies, computer game playing is viewed as comprising contextually situated and informed meaning making practices (Apperley, 2010; Arnseth, 2006; Beavis, et al., 2005; Bryce & Rutter, 2003b; Carr, 2005; Jason, 2003; Sjöblom, 2011) rather than limited to the rules and the design of games. These studies are significant as they recognise the situated and local nature of computer game playing rather than reducing game play to one common practice and experience, which is generalised to all situations and contexts. Apperley (2010) speaks of ‘situated gaming’, which serves to ‘evoke the specificity of contexts that define particular gaming situations’. Apperley (2010) argues that different contexts create different game-playing experiences. In a similar vein, Taylor (2006) argues that a single stereotypical gamer or game-playing
experience does not exist. Instead, game playing consists of many varied experiences (Taylor & Witkowski, 2010). Gaming in public can for example mean very many things, from frivolous to serious and wearing team jerseys and dressing up in fluffy anime rabbit suits (Taylor & Witkowski, 2010). De Kort, Wijand, Ijsselsteijn & Gajadhar (2007) argue that game playing is not as much a function of the games as where the games are played and with whom one is playing with. They mean that to be able to grasp the rich interactive experiences of games, the social life and processes that underlie game playing must be taken into account (Kort, Ijsselsteijn, & Gajadhar, 2007). A focus on the social and everyday context is also central in qualitative media studies. Livingstone (2002) argues that a contextual perspective on media consumption turns the analysis away from media effects to the complex social and cultural contexts that influence and shape the use of a particular media. Livingstone notes that the appropriation of a new media must be located within the everyday lives of the users (Livingstone, 2002).

While the social and spatial contexts of game playing have been highlighted in studies of co-located game play, theories on youth cultures and leisure have often been left out in an understanding of co-located game playing in public. This is surprising since co-located game playing is recognised as a youth culture (Ito, et al., 2010). Regarding co-located game playing in public as youth cultures and part of youth leisure suggests that co-located game play and game-playing cultures are not isolated phenomenon set apart from other cultural expressions and practices. Taylor and Witkowski (2010) note in their study of the mega LAN party Dreamhack how game cultures and gamers’ identities are integrated into mainstream pop/youth/network culture.

In studies of co-located game playing, game play has been viewed and discussed as social, cultural, pedagogical, learning and communicative and public practices and performances. These notions of co-located game playing are important as these shift the focus from cognitive and psychological perspectives on game playing to a focus on player’s engagement, immersion and involvement with the game software and hardware towards the social and cultural meanings, practices and contexts of co-located game playing.

In these discussions, I have underscored the social functions and meanings of game playing. There are several studies that have underscored the social nature of co-located game playing (Miller & Slater, 2000; Qiu & Liuning, 2005; Salvador, et al., 2005; Wakeford, 2003). In these studies, scholars have noted that the enjoyment of games is as much about the social interactions with friends and other players as it is with the interaction with the game. Talking and looking have been identified as central elements and enjoyments of the co-located social game play experiences (Wakeford, 2003). As Swalwell (2003) notes, ‘an appreciated activity in Lanning is competing against each other as well as getting around and talking to people and checking out what they are doing’ (Swallwell 2003). The presence of other players and the ability to monitor each others’ screens have been identified as central aspects of the social game play experience in co-located gaming environments (Kline, 2003; Kort, et al., 2007; Rutter, 2007; Swalwell, 2003). For instance, de Kort, Ijsselsteijn and Gajdahar (2007) note that the directness and intensity of the
interactions between two people are terms often used to describe these game contexts where the primary interactions are face-to-face interactions. Swalwell (2003) argues that the presence of others is what constitutes the game play experiences of a LAN since people are in one another’s physical presence and interact with each other face to face. In studies of co-located game playing in public, the spectatorship and the presence of others have been identified as central aspects of social and physical game play (Bryce & Rutter, 2006; Swalwell, 2003; Taylor & Witkowski, 2010). A common feature of these studies is that they challenge the idea of the use of the Internet or playing games in public as an individual and atomised experience (see for example (Lee, 1999).

In these studies, the social meanings of game playing have often been described in terms of togetherness, friendship, collaboration, cooperation and community. However, by emphasising community and togetherness in an understanding of co-located game-playing conflicts, hierarchies and power relationships are left out. Sjöblom (2011) rightfully brings attention to the double-sided nature of game playing which both supports friendship and cooperation and at the same time shows elements of conflicts and disputes. In his study of co-located game play interactions in game cafés in Sweden, Sjöblom highlights that game playing requires not only collaboration between players but also shows elements of disputes, blaming and conflicts (Sjöblom, 2011).

Conflicts and ridiculing in co-located game playing have also have been recognised by a scholar who studies PC bangs in South Korea. In a study of game playing in PC bangs in South Korea, Chee (2006) demonstrates that ridiculing and making fun of people and bullying, in which the worst player of a peer group is singled out and made fun of, is part of game play. This behaviour is locally referred to as ‘making wang-tta’. This practice causes some players to withdraw from playing games to avoid being bullied. In this work, it will become clear that social disputes, hierarchies and conflicts are part of the co-located game play experiences that need to be taken into account in an analysis of co-located game-playing practices and experiences.

In studies of co-located game playing, game playing is approached as a communicative practice (Ackermann, 2010b; Hung, 2007). In her study of players’ communication in a LAN Party, Ackermann (2010) makes a distinction between face-to-face communication and computer-mediated communication via online chat and headphones when studying players’ communication. Communication is described as a verbal form of meaning exchange (Ackermann, 2010a), which draws on a rather instrumental view of communication. In contrast to popular assumptions that players’ language is declining, Ackermann argues that different communication channels provide support for various forms of communication, which, instead of impoverishing, improves players’ language. In contrast to these studies, I will engage in a discussion of game playing as conversations and the ways game play conversations nurture sociability among players.
In Taylor and Witkowskis’ (2010) study of the mass LAN party Dreamhack, the public context and organisation of game play was highlighted, such as demonstrations of expertise and skills for an audience and the ways private identities were rendered publically (Taylor & Witkowski, 2010).

Ensslin (2012) focuses on two aspects of videogame-related language and communication: the ways in which videogames and their makers convey meaning to their audiences and the ways in which gamers and other stakeholders communicate and convey meanings between themselves. The latter involve language about games and gaming used by journalists, parents and other stakeholders while the former involve the language used within games by gamers and the industry. According to Ensslin (2010), games are communicative and discursive processes and patterns. Ensslin does not deny the distinct features of games such as ludological rules and limitations, which, according to her, may change the discursive patterns.

Studies of co-located game-playing practices have provided detailed analyses of players’ direct face-to-face interactions and communications, demonstrating that people manage complex multimodal tasks in game play. However, these studies have failed to develop an account of the sensory experiences of co-located game play such as the tastes, smells, sounds, touches and sights, and how these experiences and perceptions are connected to the social and local environment of game playing.

1.3 A CONTEXTUAL PERSPECTIVE ON CO-LOCATED GAME SETTINGS AND GAME PLAYING

During the field study, I came to look at the game café and game-playing practices from several perspectives. One of these perspectives consisted of an interest in the public dimensions of the social setting of game play. I was curious to learn about and understand the social life in the game café as a public place and social context. During the study, I also developed an interest in the embodied experiences and practices of playing computer games in public, with a focus on the ways co-located game playing was practiced and experienced through the senses. In regarding the game café as a public social setting, I found some of Ray Oldenburg's ideas and notions of the third place (1999) to be relevant and useful for my discussion. In exploring the sensory experiences and perceptions of co-located game play, I have followed in the footsteps of the sociological accounts on the senses of Kalekin-Fishman and K.E.Y. Low to understand the role and function of the senses and their relationships to the local environment.

1.3.1 A PUBLIC APPROACH

In his book, The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hang Outs at the Heart of a Community, Oldenburg presents his ideas and assumptions about modern urban public life. According to Oldenburg, the third place is a generic term for a great variety of public places that host regular, voluntary, informal and happy gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work (Oldenburg, 1999, p. 16). The third place is defined by how it is related to
the first and second places. Oldenburg argues the home is the first place, which is the most important place of all for individuals. It is the first regular and predictable environment of the growing child and the one that will have the greatest effect upon his or her development. The second place is the work setting, which reduces the individual to a productive, single role. Work life fosters competition, provides the means of a living and also improves the material quality of life. The second place is therefore important for the material conditions in peoples’ lives. However, neither of these places is able to foster and enhance community and democracy among citizens. The third place is the core setting of public informal life. Oldenburg (1999) argues that a dynamic informal public life is crucial for the development of great cities, for society and essential individual freedom, while ‘the absence of a public informal life, leads to individual loneliness, isolation and lack of community’. Therefore, the third place is the solution to the decline of the public informal life. Oldenburg’s critique of the lack of informal public life in America follows in the footsteps of urban sociologists who trace the decline of public life in America to the middle class values or capitalist consumption. For instance, Richard Sennett (1973) highlights the middle class fears of public places, whereby home is underscored as a safe place (Sennett, 1973), while Philippe Aries (1977) gives a critique of the modern urban development, which, according to him, has killed the essential relationships that once made a city liveable and has caused the role of the family to be over-expanded (Aries, 1977). Oldenburg’s (1999) critique of the modern urban society draws upon traditional ideas and values of public life and community linked to the nuclear family and traditional gender roles. In contrast to the eroding of public American life Oldenburg celebrates the dynamic public informal life in cities in Europe such as the English pub, the German bier house, the Italian taverns and the French cafés.

According to Oldenburg (1999), a third place serves as the escape from home and work. However, Oldenburg is careful to point out that the escape theme should not be seen as erroneous in substance but in emphasis, in other words it focuses too much upon outer factors that shape the third place rather than being an essential feature of the third place. Instead, Oldenburg points out eight characteristics essential for a third place. I will introduce these here without analysing them in detail. This will be done in the findings. The first characteristic rests on the assumption that a third place is on neutral ground. It is not located at someone’s home, so people can come and go with no one acting as a host. Therefore, people may come and go as they wish. The second characteristic is that a third place is a leveller; it reduces individuals to a footing of equality. In his view, people from different classes and positions meet and gather together where formal positions are erased. The third quality is that in a third place conversation is the main activity. The fourth element is that a third place is accessible and provides accommodation; it has generous opening hours. The fifth trait rests on the assumption that a third place is made up by regulars. In a concrete sense, this means that the regulars make the place come alive; it is the regulars who set the tone of conviviality. The sixth characteristic is a third place is a home away from home where people feel at ease. There is a warm, comfortable and relaxed atmosphere. The seventh quality is the mood is playful; those who start to talk seriously are doomed to failure. The eighth
and final quality is that a third place has a low profile. This means that a third place is typically plain and its interior and design do not stick out. The people who come there come to at third place for its atmosphere rather than its looks. It must be noted that in Oldenburg's view, third places are limited to physical public places where people gather face to face. However, in studies of virtual game worlds (Ducheneaut, et al., 2007; Steinkuehler, 2006), it has been argued that virtual game worlds can be seen and used as third places.

1.3.2 AN EMBODIED APPROACH TO GAME PLAY

If Oldenburg's notions and ideas of the third place were used as an analytical framework for a close-up investigation of the game café as a public informal social setting, a slightly different approach is taken to understand the embodied experiences and practices of co-located game playing. By shifting the analytical focus from the social setting of the game café to the embodied experiences of co-located game play should not be seen as a strategy to disconnect the notions of 'somewhere' from the practices and 'experiences' of game play. It is rather an effort that more clearly incorporates these. Game scholars have argued the need to shift the focus away from what occurs on-screen and recognise that the player is a person with a physical and embodied existence and that play is an embodied experience (Crawford, 2012). Despite a recognition of the body in game play, traditionally, computer game play has been thought of as a disembodied practice. Crawford (2012), who quotes Westecott, argues for bringing the body back into play. Westecott (2008) argues that video game play requires physical manipulation and input when using Wiimote, a PlayStation Move controller or the physical movements of a gamer in front of a Xbox Kinect Sensor. The recognition of the body in computer games play is not unique to scholars of computer game play. The body has been recognised and highlighted in the research field of 'human computer interactions' (Dourish, 2001 ; Fernaeus, 2006). The perspective of 'embodied interactions' (Dourish, 2001 ) seeks to avoid simplified, dualistic notions of human actions such as distinguishing bodily interactions from cognitive ones (Fernaeus, 2006). Embodiment is not only a physical manifestation but a participative status as a way of being rather than a physical property (Dourish, 2001 ).

Sjöblom (2008) argues that gaming interactions (performed on and around the screen) can be seen as embodied actions, because, citing Dourish (2001), 'they are actions that occur in real space and time, and that are performed through physical manifestations in those dimensions' (original emphasis) (Sjöblom, 2008). In a study of the text-based virtual world it has been argued that the corporeal body is ever present (Sundén, 2003 ). In her ethnographic study of embodiment in virtual text-based MUDs, Sundén (2003) argues that the virtual is and always has been embodied. However, while previous work on embodied game play has studied the physical and tangible manipulations and feedback of game play, this work focuses on the sensory experiences of game play such as the touch, smell, taste, sound and sight, supported by the local environment.
There have been studies focusing on the senses and computer game playing. However, most of these studies take a cognitive and physiological perspective on the senses, and have primarily been concerned with how various game software and hardware input devices are able to support and enhance cognitive and physiological perceptions and experiences of games (Bayliss, 2007; Belma Ramic-Brkic, 2010). For instance, Shinkle (2005, 2008) explores human senses in computer games. She uses a neuroscience and a phenomenological perspective, by looking at the relationships between the body, the emotions and the proprioceptive senses. As regards the senses, in contrast to taking a cognitive or physiological approach, mine is a sociological perspective. This perspective is inspired by the work of Kalekin-Fishman and E.Y. Low (2010), which argues that the human senses should be seen not as universal human modes, but locally situated and diverse and charged with meanings (Kalekin-Fishman & E.Y.Low, 2010). Also, I must note that the idea of five universal senses is a cultural construction in itself (Iida, 2010). This perspective challenges the physiological and psychological views on the senses, as the latter views reduce the senses to biological or cognitive mechanisms (Kalekin-Fishman & E.Y.Low, 2010). Kalekin-Fishman and E.Y. Low (2010) regard the senses as cultural and local mechanisms that are afforded by the social environment and place, pointing out that people live in places charged with meanings and feelings that build up over time. Accordingly, the everyday life is an important aspect of the sensuous perceptions and experiences.

From a similar perspective, Iida (2010) notes that an ‘anthropology of senses’ underscores the diversity of perception and the culturally specific relationship between different modalities of the senses. This means that the senses are experienced in relation to the actors’ lived experiences and do not exist autonomously from the everyday life. Iida’s (2010) study of Thai massage in the tourist part of Thailand demonstrates how the middle-class view of a ‘natural’ therapy and Western notions of tactility have shaped the tactile practices of Thai massage. They note that this practice has undergone a commodification and a globalisation change (Iida, 2010). In a field study of the sensual experiences of the alleyways in Tokyo, Imai (2010) notes that smell, touch and sounds connect people with the neighbourhood and give opportunities for topics and objects to talk about (Imai, 2010). These examples underscore the cultural and local variations of sensory experiences and the way the local place and environment shape these experiences. Kalekin-Fishman and K.E.Y. Low (2010) argue a need for uncovering the diverse ways in which the senses are invoked because of the surrounding affordances. The senses do not operate in individuals in isolation nor are acted upon homogenously within a particular social context; instead, places afford a specific, but a wide range of sensory experiences (Kalekin-Fishman & E.Y.Low, 2010). No single sense can be afforded alone; people are accommodating in a place where people are involved in holistic sensory experiences (Kalekin-Fishman & E.Y.Low, 2010). The senses are thus imbued by meanings and these govern the way people position and relate to each other in groups and guide their interactions and actions.
A sociological perspective on the senses makes it possible to explore the senses as diverse and locally situated and how these are linked to and embedded within the local and cultural environment of co-located game playing. However, in this perspective sensory experiences are viewed as social and cultural modes afforded by the local environment. Adopting a focus on the sensory perceptions and experiences of game play is to highlight the ways players perceive and experience the computer games not only through social interactions with other players, staff, friends and machines but through the senses and the local and cultural environment.

1.4 OUTLINE

This dissertation is organised in five parts. In the first chapter, ‘Introduction’, I present the research problem, research questions and the analytical focus of the field study. After presenting the problem and research questions, I locate this dissertation within previous studies and research on co-located game settings and game playing in public. As a last step, I introduce the contextual approach that has guided my way of looking at co-located game playing and game cafés. In the second chapter, ‘The historical context of game cafés and public computer game play’, I situate the emergence of game cafés, mass LAN parties and public co-located game playing within a historical context, by tracing game cafés and public game playing to their predecessors, Internet cafés, amusement parks and arcades. In the third chapter, ‘Studying public game settings and co-located game playing’, I describe the design and process of doing a field study on a game café and a mass LAN party. I also describe how the research questions evolved during the fieldwork. In the last section of this chapter, I reflect on my role as a researcher and my involvement during the field study. In the fourth chapter, ‘Sensing game play’, I discuss the findings from the study on the senses for game play experiences and evaluate the sensory perspective. In the next chapter, ‘The game café as a third place’, I discuss the ways in which the field study of the game café conforms to or challenges notions of the third place by Oldenburg (1999). Grounded in this discussion and analysis of the field study of the game café, I present a re-conceptualisation of Oldenburg’s notions of the third place that is sensitive to the local particularities of the game café. In the last chapter, ‘Discussion’, I discuss the findings in relation to the research questions, reflect on the methodological limitations of doing a field study and suggest some directions for future studies.
When did the first game café appear? What public contexts and settings do the game café emerge from? This chapter gives a historical account of game cafés, LAN parties and public computer game playing, which trace the emergence of the game café to the Internet café and playing computer games in public to non-computer games played in amusement parks and pinball harbours in the eighteenth century. The game café is an offspring of the Internet café, which is an offspring of the Nordic telectorches in the 1970s and the American ‘free net’ in the 1980s (Liff & Steward, 2003). The first Internet café was developed from the civic community model of e-access (Liff & Steward, 2003). Liff and Steward (2003) note that the innovation of the Internet café coincidently happened with the rising of policies to ensure wider public access to the Internet by government authorities throughout the world. They note that concerns over a digital divide were accompanied by a recognition of the need for new publicly accessible places with particular attention on libraries and community centres. This means that the first generations of Internet cafés in Europe had civic and political goals, with the aim of decreasing the digital divide by making the Internet and computers accessible in public. This is still much the case in countries outside the US, especially Western Europe and Japan (Kolko & Cynthia, 2008; Nardi, 2010); (Sun, 2010). Besides being the offspring of telectorches, the Internet café was an extension of the traditional café. Stewart (2000) notes that people have always met to eat, drink, talk and play games in places such as taverns and inns. As such, cafés are not and have not been places only for drinking but sites for learning, socialising and playing, for travellers to find some home comforts or meet others and to do business or read books (Stewart, 2000). Pubs, cafés, clubs, amusement parks, arcades and casinos have always featured games as part of their services and activities and as such, digital games made their way in the public places as soon as they were invented. Stewart (ibid.) notes a change in the pub and café culture in England as customers look for the continental style of the café, which is not necessarily a drinking space but is also used for relaxing, working and shopping. As noted by Laegren and Steward (2006), the placing of the use of the Internet in a café-like environment was to complement the use the Internet with the sociality offered in the café.

Swalwell (2006) argues that Lanning (to use the LAN), which is about getting out of the house and the (home-located) computer rooms, resembles older forms of public game play more than it does other online game play performed in digital virtual game worlds. Lanning is part of a culture where there is life on the streets, where public place is not just traversed but lingered in and where games have long been public (Swalwell, 2006). In such cultures, games never had to come out of the house. It is also important to recognise that sports and games have a history that predates computer gaming (Bryce & Rutter, 2003b). Games such as chess, cards and dominos have been played in public as well as private spaces even when not undertaken as a competitive sport (Bryce & Rutter, 2003b).
Other public social contexts in which games are played in public are amusement parks. Tivolis have offered games such as dominos, darts and air rifle shooting (Rutter, 2006), while public places such as pubs, cafes, clubs, amusement parks, arcades and casinos have always featured games as part of their services and activities. Dominos, bagatelle and skittles have been called ‘pub games’. Kline and Whiteford (2003) note that public places were often dynamic and sexualised entertainment venues for gaming practices such as shooting, betting, racing and competitions.

Video games first became accessible in public in arcades, malls and pubs (Kline & Whiteford, 2003: 91). The shift from hacker culture to arcade games democristised the games and made games available to others than computer nerds. However, they note that the social biases that were implemented in the technologies did not disappear. Arcade games were mostly male game venues. Themes such as shooting, violence and intensive competition, which were present in any form of Pentagon-sponsored inceptions, became a natural element of commercialised games and became amplified in these environments. The black arcades were perceived as socially odd places, places for young men’s moral decline and corruption. The video game industry had to decide whether to capitalise on these arenas or to create rumours for parents that would position their products as good games. With the decline of arcade halls, arcades have been placed in public settings such as pubs, fairs and arcade halls (Bryce & Rutter, 2006).

2.1 A CLASSIFICATION OF CO-LOCATED GAME SETTINGS

In this work, I use the term game café. As a strategy to make clear what I mean by the game café and how the game café differs from and relates to other public computer game settings, in this section I present a classification of co-located game settings. These definitions should by no means be seen as exhaustive, final and ultimate. Nominal definitions are not fixed and final and do not make any claims to be true. Instead, these are used to make clear what these definitions refer to and how they are used (Sohlberg & Sohlberg, 2001). In this classification, co-located game settings are not restricted to public settings, as these include game play at home, at students’ dormitories and at university campuses. A common feature of co-located game settings regardless whether these are located in public, semi-private or private locations is that these are real-time events where people meet face to face to play computer games on a network and online or over a LAN. Therefore, non-computer game settings such as casinos and racing events, horse or dog derby hazard games, black jack and roulette and horse or dog racing where the players have limited chances to affect the outcome of the results of the games are excluded in this classification.

In this dissertation, the fieldwork is located in public game settings. My notion of ‘public’ draws on Oldenburg’s idea of public places, those informal places located away from home and work, such as cafés, restaurants and pubs to bookstores, hair salons and public libraries. However, Oldenburg does not make any distinction between public places according to their level of access. In sociological urban
studies, the term ‘public’ has been defined according to the degree of access. Harrisson and Morgan (2005) make a distinction between several types of public sites for youth according to their level of social regulations and accessibility. Accordingly, they make a distinction between unrestrictive, marginally restricted, quasi-public and restrictive public places. The unrestrictive public places are those to which any teen has access, such as sidewalks, street corners, open-air city plazas and so on. The marginally restricted public places, on the other hand, are those places to which almost any teen has access but that have various municipal restrictions in terms of how long the youth can stay continuously at the site, such as bus stops, bus kiosks or city parks. Last are restrictive (quasi) public places to which any teen with a generalised status as a customer or student has access such as fast-food restaurants, football games and clubbing venues. A restrictive public place is not as open and accessible as street corners, sidewalks and city plazas, but not as strictly regulated as cafes and restaurants.

2.1.1 GAME CAFÉ

In this dissertation, I use the term game café when speaking of a specific sort of co-located game play establishment allocated in a public setting. A number of other terms have been used to refer to these establishments, such as wang ba(r)s (Internet bars) in China, PC bangs (PC-rooms) in South Korea, LAN-centres in Australia and gaming centres in Sweden. My definition of the game café depends on the provision of computer equipment and software, payment model, café or bar services, public accessibility and size.

A game café is a co-located public game place that holds stationary PC computers, broadband and Internet access, and a large selection of network and online games for a fee. A game café runs a café or a bar, stays open weekly and usually hosts fewer than 200 seats (see Table 1).

A game café holds stationary PC computers and usually provides high-speed Internet access such as broadband. The latter service shifts between advanced and developing countries. In developing countries, high-speed Internet access via broadband is not always available. The selection of network and online games is usually based on the most popular game titles with references to the national contexts. For instance, at the time of my field study the most popular game titles in the café Galaxy were World of Warcraft, DotA, (a modification of Warcraft 3), Battlefield 2 and Counter Strike. These network games and multiplayer online games are by far the most popular games at game cafes as these games can be used to collaborate with friends. The payment model of a game café is based on patrons’ fees. The customers are charged a fee per hour to use the computers and access the Internet and the computer games. Gaming centres in Sweden offer the customers a membership, which entitles the members to reduced fees. The fee was 30 kronor (5 dollars) per hour. A game café usually holds a café, a bar or a shop serving cold and hot beverages, light food, snacks and candies. The café at Galaxy was reminiscent of a kiosk or a grill rather than the trendy Italian-inspired coffee shops that are common in Swedish café culture. The menu offered coffee and tea, snacks, candies,
chocolate cakes, muffins, microwaved pizza and grilled sandwiches and sodas and Energy drinks.

2.1.2 INTERNET CAFÉ

The close affinity between the game café and the Internet café, also called cyber cafes, has been pointed out. For instance, (Gajadhar, et al., 2009) note that ‘a game café can be described as an Internet café holding computer games’. However, the distinction between Internet and game cafes is not always clear and varies between cultural contexts. In Europe, there are two terms for a game cafe and an Internet cafe (Gajadhar, et al., 2009), while in Asia and South America, there is only one term. However, as noted by Liu (2009), although game cafés originate from Internet cafés, they have evolved into their own distinctive places and cultures (Liu, 2009). The term Internet cafe has been used as catch-all term to refer to a shifting range of co-located computer settings providing the customers with Internet access in public, PC computers and in some cases, computer games. These have their local terms such as cabinas publicas (in Peru), cafés del Internet (Ecuador), bars (Spain), public access (Brazil), PC bangs or part of the franchise model Starbucks or Coffee Time (US) (Salvador, et al., 2005). Salvador et al. (2005) note that a ‘typical’ cyber café hosts about five to twenty computers with varying levels of access (dial-up or broadband) and, with Internet telephony, access to copying and faxes. Rather than looking for the most typical Internet café, the term Internet cafe has been used to name shared computer Internet contexts used for businesses, tele-working and professional work where computer gaming has been a marginalised activity (Liff & Steward, 2003). Although the computers in an Internet café can and are used for playing computer games, the games that are played are web games. In the Internet café, people pay a fee to use the computers and access the Internet. The Internet café usually stays open seven days a week.

In Stockholm, a wireless local network area (WLAN) is offered in many of the ‘traditional’ cafés. WLAN allows people to access the Internet on their laptops through a code key, which is handed out by the staff when the customer purchases something from the menu. Accordingly, traditional cafés are a mixture of café and office spaces. The provision of WLAN has become a sale argument to attract new categories of customers. The provision and services of WLAN at regular cafés do not challenge the Internet café, as these settings do not offer printers, faxes and computers.

2.1.3 LAN PARTY

A LAN party can be described as a real-time, face-to-face event that brings people and their machines together for several days of intensive interaction and play (Taylor & Witkowski, 2010 ). These events involve everything from file sharing and demos to game playing and a range of other social activities (Taylor & Witkowski, 2010 ). However, a LAN party varies in size across settings. Ackermann (2010) makes a distinction between three types of LAN parties. Her classification draws on Vogelgesang’s classifications of LAN parties in Germany, the private LAN, LAN
parties and LAN events. Ackermann notes that this categorisation depends on the number of participants, on the degree of familiarity with the group and the connection to non-game profits such as prizes being made available.

In his classification, the private LAN party is based on familiarity and has a small number of participants, about 5–10 people who belong to a group of friends. The private LAN is usually set up at someone's home. The LAN party constitutes a middle-sized LAN with more than 100 participants located in sport clubs, scout clubs, universities and youth recreation centres. Participants have to register in advance to the LAN party and pay a small fee. LAN events with more than 10,000 participants (I refer to these events as mass LAN parties) are often hosted in giant exhibition halls. Dreamhack, the largest LAN party in Sweden, sets up two times a year and promotes itself as the largest LAN party in the world and attracts more than 10,000 participants. Other giant computer events are The Gathering in Norway and CampZone in the Netherlands. LAN events have usually started as a small LAN by a group of friends who like to share files, demos or play computer games but have grown over the years. A LAN party typically stretches for a day or for a weekend. Unlike in a game café, at a LAN party people have to bring their own computers. Players pay an entry fee to access these events. Mass LAN parties/LAN events hold tournaments and offer prize money.

### 2.1.4 ARCADE HALLS

According to Gajadhar et al. (2009), the invention of game cafés resembles the allure of arcade halls in the 1980s. They note that traditional arcade halls are decreasing. Instead, arcades are located in entertainment, sport and game play contexts such as at ferries, game cafes, bars, pool, amusement parks or mass LAN parties. The traditional arcade hall hosts arcades such as flipper machines, basketball machines, black jack machines and car-racing machines. Arcades are not mobile and players usually have to pay per play session. A game session usually takes only a few minutes (Gajadhar, et al., 2009).

### 2.1.5 E-SPORT EVENT

World Cyber Games and similar international and national e-sport events are public competitions arranged in public game places (Hutchins, 2008; Rambush, et al., 2007). In these e-sports events professional gamers meet to play at tournaments and to compete. Studies have shown that e-sport events are arranged as separate public settings while some are set up within other gaming events such as mass LAN parties. For instance, at the mass LAN party Dreamhack, one of the game halls is dedicated to e-sports and professional game playing, where players can win a seat for the final competition at World Cyber Games (Taylor & Witkowski, 2010 ). An e-sport event is an occasional event rather than an everyday activity.
2.1.6 CONSOLE GAME CLUBS

A console game club can be described as an game interest group and game culture that meets to play console games in a physical location for a week around the clock (Jakobsson, 2007).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Game café</th>
<th>Internet café</th>
<th>Arcade hall</th>
<th>LAN party</th>
<th>E-sport events</th>
<th>Console clubs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Online and network games</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stationary computers and/or TV screens</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet and Broadband/modem access</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Café/Bar</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open on a weekly basis</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 200 seats</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: A classification of physical co-located game settings. Table 1 displays spatial and organisational differences between various game settings for computer game playing. They differ in services and size. We can see in Table 1 that the Internet café shares many features with the game café, but the former setting does not provide online and network games to the customers. The mass LAN party is a huge computer event populated by more than 1000 persons, charging a fee to get entrance. In contrast to game cafés, people bring their own computers and games to a LAN party. The e-sport game event is a public game context that holds game competitions.
3 STUDYING PUBLIC GAME SETTINGS AND COLocATED GAME PLAYING

3.1 DOING A FIELDWORK OF A GAME CAFÉ AND A LAN PARTY

To understand the context and culture of playing co-located games in public, I decided to stay in one game café, to experience this social phenomenon through firsthand encounters and experiences. This approach was a strategy to learn about public game cultures, social context, relationships and the social interactions, practices, motives and needs from ‘inside’. Approaching a social phenomena from ‘inside’ has been described as fieldwork, case study, qualitative research, participatory observations and ethnography (Månsson & Henriksson, 1996; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Burgess, 1990). Although these terms have different emphasises given to the work, which is done by different people (Burgess, 1990), they share some common traits. Common to all of these methodologies is the purpose of learning about the people, culture, social life or organisation that is being investigated in an everyday local context. This approach requires the field researcher to stay with a group of people during an extensive period (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007), which is called to ‘go native’ by Burgess (1990).

However, ethnographic descriptions should not be seen as objective documents reflecting a transparent reality (Sundén, 2003 ). The people who are being studied and the researcher construct the social reality (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007 ). Accordingly, the social reality does not exist as an untouched and ‘natural’ state but is created through intentional acts, social interactions, social norms, values, ideas and so on. This view is rooted in the philosophical system known as social constructivism, which originates from the ideas of Berger and Luckmann (1976). Berger and Luckmann (1976) argue that the participants, people and subjects are agents and creators of their social reality. Social entities and phenomenon are the results of an interaction between individuals and not something that exists ‘out there’ (Bryman, 2001).

This study can be described as empirical research grounded in theory (Aspers, 2011). Thus, the findings of this study were grounded in empirical data but the theoretical concepts came to play a central role in the research process. The theories and concepts pointed out directions and served as a focus for the empirical field study. Thus, the concepts were not approached as fixed and rigid ideas, which were either rejected or supported, following an deductive approach, but as being open for revisions and refinements if the ideas did not ‘fit’ the empirical data (Aspers, 2011).

It is important to point out that this approach did not follow the principles of Grounded Theory (Glaser, 1978). Even though this study was explorative and did not start from any preconceived theories, ideas, concepts or hypotheses, the concepts and theories emerged from reading earlier studies on co-located game playing and game cafés and LAN parties and were not generated from the empirical
material. Therefore, the theoretical instances did not function according to the principles of Grounded Theory (Glaser, 1978), in which theoretical concepts are generated from the empirical data. Instead, ideas and concepts were generated from already existing theories. The theoretical concepts were chosen based on being suited to the particular object of study and research interest of this work (Aspers, 2011), the social and cultural contexts of game playing. Theoretical concepts helped me to sharpen the analytical focus, to delimit the field study and guide the interpretations of the field material but did not determine or predict the results and findings. In response, the concept of the third place was used as a general idea and point of directions but not as a fixed and definite concept that determined the empirical findings. In other words, the empirical data (the first-hand level of the construction's data) had the possibility to 'strike back' if the theory and concepts did not fit the empirical data. The theory was not rejected but was refined and developed. This way of using concepts and theories on empirical data is referred to as bracketing the theory (Aspers, 2011). The researcher has to leave the theory when gathering the data on the field, to be able to reach the actors' own meanings and ideas and observe the activities without being limited by a theory.

3.2 THE DEVELOPMENT OF A RESEARCH PROBLEM AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Sundén (2003) notes that in textbooks, fieldwork is described as linear and neatly organised. However, 'in reality an ethnographic process is rather circular, since certain aspects tend to recur but at the same time evolve as the meanings of these aspects change in the light of new experiences' (Sundén, 2003, p. 41). My fieldwork was neither linear nor neatly organised, it was more like a circular process since certain aspects tended to recur throughout the fieldwork. However, a more fitting description of the fieldwork was like being on and in the ocean, an open wide space where research themes, ideas and topics developed and occurred unexpectedly; I was shifting between drifting, floating and diving, surfing on the top of the waves, aware of the unpredictable nature of fieldwork, of sudden shifts, moves, changes and processes.

In this section, I share my thoughts and reflections about a certain aspect of the process of fieldwork, the emergence and development of research problems and research questions. In the beginning of my PhD work, my research topic was very vague. I had an interest in computer games, identities and young people but that was about all. I had no idea how to turn my very broad and unspecified interest into a well-defined and 'researchable' topic and questions. Along the research process, my interest for identities became less important and developed into an interest in what people were doing and talking about in front of the screens, for the game-playing activities and practices in the game café, players' engagement and the spatial boundaries of play and social relationships. My interest in the game café as a game play context emerged later in the research. I dug into the field to find ideas and directions that could help me formulate my research topic, through a lot of encounters, participating in different meetings, seminars, giving public talks,
discussing with supervisors and visiting and participating in game events, game exhibitions and conferences.

The fieldwork started in another geographical site than in Stockholm. In 2005, I started to collect interviews in a game café in Sundsvall, in my hometown. I had heard about this game café from friends and family so I believed this was a good opportunity to find people who played computer games. Since at that time I visited my parents on a regular basis, my strategy was to take these opportunities to hang out in the game café. During my trips to Sundsvall I heard about a mass LAN party called Krangparty, which was organised in April each year. I decided that was a great opportunity to conduct interviews and talk with people about why they participated in such an event and see what people were doing. I spent two days at Krangparty, doing an interview with a person in the staff and with people who were staying there. I also talked to owners of local businesses and retail stores and representatives of non-governmental organisations. Also, I walked around and looked at what people were doing. Krangparty lasted for three days and I stayed there all the days. Based on my experiences and the results from this event, I wrote an article about cyborg citizenship that was presented at the conference *Virtual 2005* and was published in a book. (Hernwall, 2006).

I soon realised that my trips to Sundsvall, despite being twice a month, were not sufficient to get interview data for the study. Therefore, I decided to search for a game café in Stockholm where I could find players to conduct interviews about their activities, needs and practices. I soon found a game café located in the centre of Stockholm City. During the interview study and my stay in the game café, I thought that something was missing with doing an interview study. I was asking myself, what is the point of conducting an interview study about co-located game playing with players located in a game café if I do not take into account the game café as an analytical category. I came to the conclusion that by leaving out the contextual aspects of co-located game playing in the game café, I would be missing a great opportunity to learn about the contextual experiences and meanings of co-located game playing. This was partly due to the fact that I had become fascinated by the game café in itself as a social context and not just as a location to find informants. This led to a analytical shift and a change in focus from just the players’ needs and motives and practices of playing games to the social, spatial and physical environment and location of game play. In 2007, I decided to do a follow-up study of the game café.

When analysing the field material, my analytical emphasises shifted back and forth between the social and physical dimensions of game playing, the game space, players’ engagement and the social relationships in offline game settings. These analytical themes and issues dealt with certain aspects of the contextual experiences and practices of co-located game playing although I was not aware of it at that time. In 2010, I was writing a paper about the game café as a social setting, using the term third place. This theme emerged from a writing session together with my colleagues where some of the central ideas and concepts in this work became outlined, such as focusing on the place of game play.
3.3 SELECTION AND DESCRIPTION OF THE FIELD

Burgess (1990) describes a field as the circumscribed area of study, which may involve texts, media, people, physical and social locations (Burgess, 1990). My field can be described as a collision of people, media, material and physical places spread over several geographical destinations. As I have already mentioned, my choice of social setting was not strategic but based on a pragmatic decision. I found the game café suitable to find informants who played games and a location where games are played. For those reasons, I selected the game café primarily as a site to reach people who were playing games, rather than a valuable setting and a context to reach an understanding of the contextual experiences of game playing. It was not until my research focus developed into an interest for the contextual dimensions of game playing that the game café became a field. Some of my colleagues at work had informed me about this game café and since I had no previous knowledge and experiences of game cafés at all, I decided to go to the game café to check it out. The game café, which is called Galaxy in this dissertation, (I have changed its’ real name in this work) belongs to one of the older and most established game cafés in Stockholm. It had a regular and fairly large customer base. Although I did not select the game cafe as a suitable setting for doing a field study, I chose to continue to visit the game café. This choice was partly grounded in my first impression of the game café. The familiar atmosphere between staff and customers struck me during my first encounter. I liked the easy access, as well as the staff’s casual attitudes towards my staying in the game café. I did not encounter any hassle regarding my stay among the staff (perhaps their casual attitudes towards my staying reflected a simple lack of interest). I was not required to inform the staff about my visits or ask the managers about permission to do interviews. There was no doubt that this was a place for co-located game playing. The walls were decorated with posters of games and releases of games and information on the walls offered reduced prices on membership and special offers on games.

Staff and parents were recruited through friends and family, who in their turn helped me to come in contact with other informants. This way of recruiting informants is called a snowball sample (Patton, 1990). It was more difficult to find parents of children who played games in game cafés or visited LAN parties than I expected. My intention was to recruit parents through children who were playing games in the game cafe. I approached them by introducing myself and gave them contact information email to where the parents could reach me but no one replied. I also put up information about my research at the front desk in two game cafés but had no response from parents. I got in contact with one mother through her son who was staying in a game cafe. All the parents except for one were recruited through my friends and families. I decided to leave out the social interactions and activities that took place outside the game café as my interest was in the meanings and motives of playing games within the game café. The game café was populated not only by game players; other customers also used the computers to surf on the Net, to write and print documents. However, for the same reason behind my decision to limit my field study to the social interactions and practices taking place inside the game café, I
decided to not study these as my interest was in the meanings and motives of co-
located game playing.

The informants who were recruited for the interviews were in the age span of 14–25
years old. Most of the time, I approached the informants when they were seated in
front of the computers. I assumed that they would be more willing to let me
interview them if I did the interviews at their computers. A few informants were
recruited when they were waiting for seats or walking or hanging around in the
game café.

3.4 DESTINATIONS AND TIME OF FIELDWORK

The fieldwork of the game café evolved over several months. However, to estimate
the fieldwork in months may give a wrong estimation of the actual time that I spend
in the game café. I spent about two/three times a week of about two to four hours
each. In total, the fieldwork resulted in 120 hours of observations. I also conducted
35 interviews with informants in groups and with single persons and three single
interviews with the staff. In 2007, I conducted a second field study, between October
to December. At that time, I did 100 hours of observations and conducted 25 semi-
structured interviews with groups of players and single players. In total, I conducted
230 hours of field observations and 60 interviews with single players and players in
groups. The field study of the game cafe took place during two periods.

A small part of the field study was located in a mass LAN party, Dreamhack, in
Jönköping in Sweden. The field study of Dreamhack did not follow the standard
procedures for ethnography such as getting immersed and involved in a culture for a
long-term period (Miller & Slater, 2000). I visited Dreamhack Winter 2006 from
afternoon to midnight. I returned to Dreamhack Summer 2009 to give a talk and
took the occasion to participate in the event for two days. On this occasion, I got a
24-hour pass and rented a seat and played World of Warcraft with a colleague. At
Dreamhack Winter 2006 and Dreamhack Summer 2009, I did not take any
systematic field notes. I stayed there from the afternoon to the next day.

The time intervals of the field studies did not follow any systematic strategy or
logical time schedule but were rather the result of occasions, coincidences and
available resources.

3.5 OBSERVATIONS ON THE FIELD

A large part of the field data were collected through direct observations of people's
activities and interactions with computers, people and the setting, events and
happenings and situations. To get direct experiences of a certain culture or a
situation is central to ethnographical fieldwork (Aspers, 2011). However, conducing
direct observations of a culture or a social situation is a skill and practice that
requires practice, training and experience. I became aware of this during my first
encounter with Galaxy. When I first entered Galaxy, it was a rainy day in January
2005; all I could see were young men and teenager boys seated in long rows in front
of their computers, sipping on their sodas, captured by the computers. Observing these men from a distance, they all appeared to be isolated islands, sitting side by side without communicating, interacting or being connected in any sense. It seemed like they were absorbed, lost in a computer game world where nothing else mattered than the games. It seemed as though they did not interact with people. It felt like I had entered a foreign and unknown territory that I had only read about, but had no personal experience of. As my research continued, and as I got more experienced and skilled in doing observations, I noticed that the players in the game café were not isolated islands lost in the games; instead, game playing in the game café was a social and culturally meaningful practice situated within a peer context and showing features of a homosocial macho culture.

As my intention was to describe and understand the public informal social life in the game café, I decided to limit my observations to the social activities, interactions and practices taking place ‘offline’. I chose to not look at the interactions and communications online, in-game chat channels and text messages. This decision should not be understood as a strategy to dismiss the significance and meanings of online virtual worlds and communications in the game café. The term virtual ethnography coined by Hine was used to describe ethnography in virtual settings (Hine, 2000). It is rather a strategy to put emphasises on the physical location and meanings of co-located game playing, which has been missing in many studies of computer game playing. Although fieldwork in traditional anthropology is located in a physical and material place, with the emergence of the global spread of the Internet, the traditional ideas and methodologies of ethnography have been challenged.

Burgess (2000) notes that each organisation has its own social pace. The time dimension is ever present in all field situations. The social pace and organisation were also structured by the time in the game café. I stayed in the game café in the late mornings, during lunch time, after school around three to six and between six and eight in the evening. On two occasions I stayed in the game café between twelve in the night and half past three in the mornings. The game café’s peak times occurred between after school and work and before dinner. At this time of the day, the game café was crowded. Besides observing the players’ social interactions, practices and activities in the game café, I used the toilet, drank coffee and ate candy, smelled the odour of human bodies and computers and felt the heat from the computers and the air from the fans.

3.6 TAKING FIELD NOTES

I documented the observations through taking field notes. The aim of taking field notes is to produce detailed descriptions of the social setting, the atmosphere and peoples’ actions, interactions and activities. These are called thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973).

Despite the benefits of using a video camera, allowing the researcher to return to the video recordings, I decided to not use a video camera when staying in the game café.
or in the LAN party. Instead, I took field notes in a rather traditional way, using an ink pen and a pile of sheets of paper. My decision to not use a video camera came from my wish to blend in with the environment. If I had used a video camera I would probably have stuck out more than I already did. Secondly, there was a risk that by using a video camera, I would have made the staff, players and the other customers uncomfortable, which may have influenced the social atmosphere in a negative way. As my purpose was to understand the meanings, contexts and cultures of co-located game playing practices rather than to analyse game-playing interactions and communications in detail, I think using a video camera was unnecessary for my fieldwork.

At the beginning of my fieldwork, I wrote down almost everything that I could possibly see, wherever I was standing, sitting or staying. The field notes shifted between recordings of group interactions between a group of two or four players, to parallel activities and practices performed by individuals. I alternated between taking field notes of smaller and larger groups of people, players and staff. I took field notes of what people were doing, how people interacted, what people talked about, how they were dressed, if they came alone or in groups. The field notes varied in focus and depth. Some field notes were rather scattered, consisting of a few lines, while others were rather detailed and careful recordings of peoples’ interactions with others, with the computers and the setting.

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) note that field notes are always selective. It is not possible to capture everything. This problem was also highlighted by Agar (Agar, 1996). He notes that since you do not know what is significant, you do not know what to record. Agar (2006) argues that field notes are ‘working notes’, as these can be used as ideas to follow up with interviews, or as questions that come from the interviews or things that you have noticed and want to eventually catch up on later.

For most of the time, I used field notes as ‘memory notes’. I wrote field notes at the moment when I was observing interactions, practices and events, to not forget what I observed. I also used the field notes as working notes as I followed up some notes with interview questions later.

3.7 INTERVIEWS AS CONVERSATIONS

Burgess (2000) formulates field interviews as conversations. This is an informal, unstructured and semi-structured style of interviewing that proceeds within a conversation (Burgess, 1990). I used a semi-structured informal style of interviewing, talking with about 60 young men in the game café. For most of the time, I approached the informants when they were seated in front of their computers playing and talking with friends. I assumed that they would be more willing to let me interview them if I stayed with and conducted the interviews at the computers instead of asking them to have the interviews in another setting or place. I also approached informants when they were waiting for a seat and hanging around with friends. This was a convenient strategy to reach the informants. This strategy also turned the interviews to a social opportunity where I was hanging out with a
group of players and could see what they were involved in. The result was a mix of semi-structured interviews and observations.

I conducted most of the interviews in front of the computers. Most informants did not mind letting me interview them. There were only a handful of persons who did not want to be interviewed. It was a fairly easy and accessible way to get access to informants. During the interviews, I talked to the participants about several dimensions of their experiences and motives for playing games in the game café. I asked what they liked to drink and eat, how often they stayed at the game café, how they felt about sitting physically close together, the sounds of other players, walking around, standing behind other players’ seats looking at their game screens and so on. I also used follow-up questions with the participants as the occasion arose, consistent with standard ethnographic methodology. I conducted all interviews in the game café, mostly in front of and at the participants’ computers. When possible, I asked the staff if it was ok to conduct interviews.

The interview questions were semi-structured to the extent that I had put down some questions and themes I wanted to explore. However, I did not stick to the interview guide during the time of the interviews as the questions often changed during the interview situation due to the responses of the informants. I was open to the informants’ responses and changed my interview questions due to their answers. In consequence, the interview guide was always a work in progress (Nordli, 2003). Some of the interview questions were left out because during the interviews I realised that these were not relevant, and so I added new questions. In the beginning of the field study, I used the interview guide often. However, when I got more used to interviewing, I used the interview guide less frequently; I had the interview questions in my head.

The informants who were recruited to the interviews were between 14–25 years old. I also interviewed some of the café staff. I interviewed three staff members working in Galaxy in 2007 and three staff members from three different game cafés in 2011. In June 2011, I interviewed four persons from the staff in several game cafes located in Stockholm. One of the interviews with the staff was planned in advance. I had set up an appointment with him in the game cafe. The others were done while the staff were working. As a consequence, I was not able to sit down and talk with the individuals in private. This way of conducting interviews was adapted to the dynamic and unpredictable social situations and life of the game café. Sometimes we had to interrupt the interview because of work. Neither I nor the staff saw this as a problem. Instead, it loosened up the interviews and made them more casual and informal. I also conducted interviews through telephone and did one interview in the home with parents. The selection of parents was based on the snowball method; all parents except one were recruited through my friends and my family.
3.8 MY ROLE AND INVOLVEMENT IN THE FIELD

The question arises, how did I experience my participation and stay in the game café as a women, not being a gamer, 30+ years old and non-white within a context of boys and young men, most of whom were ethnic Swedes with an interest in playing games? In spite of these obvious differences, I was not harassed or bullied by players as most players and staff were friendly during the interviews. In fact, only a handful of individuals rejected my request when I asked for an interview; some players even wanted to teach me the games they were playing and show me cheating manuals. In such cases, I had an unpleasant and uncomfortable feeling that followed me during my stay and participation in the game café. I felt and I was clearly considered as an outsider since I did not talk and behave like the players; we did not share the same experiences and language, and I was not a teenage male who liked to play computer games.

In my first stay in the game café, sitting on one of the chairs, sipping on a cup of tea, I felt uncomfortable and unpleasant for reasons that I could not explain. Later, I realised that this uncomfortable feeling had to do with the fact that this environment was homosocial, populated mostly by boys and young men, and could be rather exclusive towards people and groups who did not share the culture, the norms and interests. Several thoughts ran through my head. How should I approach and talk with the players, would they make fun of me, would they accept me? The research project felt scary rather than exciting. What had I gotten myself into? Here I was among teenage boys in peer groups in the game café; their jargon and language was often loud, and they used irony and bullying to demonstrate power and superiority towards each other. From time to time I could hear players screaming ‘cunt’ and ‘pussy’ while playing. Listening to their talk and jargon, I felt uncomfortable and unsure of how to communicate. They did not care that I could be offended. Therefore, each time before going, I had to prepare myself, mentally, before entering the game café. My physical appearance as a women made me stick out even in situations when I was not ignored. I had to ask myself, would I have felt uncomfortable if I have would have stayed in a women-dominated setting, for instance in a horse stable populated by teenage girls? It is hard to tell. Such an environment can be rather hard, exclusive and competitive, with the participants demonstrating power and social hierarchies. On the other hand, I think that such an environment would not be offensive to women as a group.

To inform the members of a group who you are and what you want to do is an important issue for research ethics, as stated by Agar (1996). During the fieldwork, my intention was to be as open and honest as possible about my research to the participants in the game café. Therefore, my idea was to inform the customers in the game café about my research project by putting up notes on the wall. However, my suggestion was turned down by the staff. They believed that it was sufficient to inform the people that I was interviewing. In retrospective, I understand their responses. Perhaps putting up information about the research placed on the wall would have affected the social atmosphere in the game café and people may have felt uncomfortable and exposed to the research whether they wished to be or not.
The manner in which I presented myself and the research project changed several times during the fieldwork. In the beginning of the field study, I introduced myself to the participants as someone who was writing a thesis about ‘computer games’ and ‘young people’. Most informants were puzzled when I introduced myself and the research project. They were not sure what I meant by ‘computer games’, and some informants asked if I was writing about the negative effects of games. Some informants responded with an ironic smile, ‘Yes, I am addicted’. Some of the younger informants asked if the interviews would be published in a newspaper. ‘Are you writing a book?’ was a common question among the younger participants. Later, I changed my presentation and introduced myself by my academic affiliation and location, before telling about my research project. This way of presenting myself seemed to be sufficiently informative to most groups.

When doing field research, the researcher has to be critical and reflect about his/her role and participation in the field (Hammersly & Atkinson, 2007). What consequences did my decision to not play games during my stay in the game café have for the fieldwork? I believe a consequence of not playing games was that I did not become accepted or became one of ‘them’. For most of the time, I was seen or treated as the odd figure who was asking questions about what they were doing, their practices, activities and everyday life.

There were some occasions when I was invited by the informants, when they wanted to teach me the games but these occasions were rather rare. One time I was interviewing a group of informants who wanted to teach me how to play the game Tibia. They informed me about the cheating manuals and showed me secret paths in the game. On another occasion I was invited to stay with a group of older informants who were raiding in the game World of Warcraft. One of the informants who worked in the game café was very friendly and invited and taught me some of the game lingo without me asking. This friendliness and invitations may suggest that this group of players did not see me as an outsider. Another possible interpretation is that they wanted to transform me into an insider. By the staff at Galaxy I was perhaps seen as the researcher or student. When I told the staff about my research, they did not show interest in the research. ‘Ok it is another student report’ they responded when I told them about my research. On one occasion, the young informants started to play with my tape recorder when I left for the rest room.

When I interviewed a player during game action play, his team co-players tended to see me as an intruder. In these situations, the co-players commented and made remarks, blaming their friend who was being interviewed for making them lose attention and be unable stay focused when I was interviewing their friends. This can be seen as an indirect way of telling me that they regarded me as an intruder. Although my intention was to blend in with the other members, I realised that I did not. Being a women, 30+, Asian looking and a non-gamer, it was hard to blend in. On one occasion when I was seated on the couch taking field notes, a person from the staff asked me who I was and what I was doing. I did not recognise him and he certainly did not recognise me. His voice could not hide a slight hint of irritation. To him, I was seen as an intruder or an odd stranger who he could not categorise. Being
a woman who did not play games, it is no wonder I stuck out. I certainly did not look like one of the regular members.

In studies on computer games, there has been a discussion whether game researchers need to play computer games themselves to be able to understand their area of research: computer games. This discussion about the researchers’ participation is not unique for game studies. It has been debated for a long time in anthropology. Agar (1996) notes that the hardcore anthropologists would argue that in order to describe the practices and interactions of the members in a culture, the ethnographers need to participate and become involved in the social practices of the members they are studying, as doing so would enable them to describe the social life from the subjects’ point of view (Agar, 1996). The other side in the debate argues that if you have an interest in a certain social cultural phenomenon, the fieldworker is able to study and understand the phenomenon without having to be involved in every practice.

My own stance and position in this debate has been ambiguous. On the one hand, I understand the side in the game research community that argues that game researchers should play games themselves to be able to understand the games and the game play practices they are studying. On the other hand, I believe that the need to play games depends on the specific research project, the research goal and the questions. If the goal of the research is to understand the meanings of playing games in a specific social and cultural context, it is not necessary to play computer games. My research interest was in the social phenomenon of playing games in a game café, with a focus on the interactions, practices and communication that took place behind the computer game screens rather than in the online game worlds; thus, my participation was limited to these experiences in the game café. This situation allowed me to pay attention to the social practices, interactions and social surroundings. If I had played games as a fieldworker in the game café, I would not have been able to observe the ongoing offline practices full time. I believe that through the many hours of observations and talking with people in the game café, I was able to reach an understanding of their passion about games even if I was not a passionate gamer myself and was able to describe their activities and practices.

3.9 SELECTION OF NEWS ARTICLES

For the study on the medias’ reporting of game cafés and LAN parties, I collected news articles reporting on game cafes and mass LAN Parties from the major Swedish newspapers Dagens Nyheter and Svenska Dagbladet, the tabloids Expressen and Aftonbladet, the local Swedish newspapers Linköpings Tidning, Kungsbacka Tidning, Göteborgs Tidning, Nerikes Allehanda, Extra Östergötland and Västerviks Tidning and the weekly newspapers Ny Teknik and Computer Sweden. These were accessible and I collected them through the online news archive Mediaarkivet, which is an online archive that stores all daily and weekly Swedish newspapers five years back.
3.10 INTERPRETATION OF MEANINGS.

Loftand et al. (2004) argue that analysis involves a transformative process in which raw data is turned into 'findings' or results. However, the commitment of 'naturalism' 'to tell it like it is' tends to reinforce the process of analysis in fieldwork as underdeveloped and implicit (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). In this work, I analyse and view the social practices, communication and interactions, media reports on game café and LAN parties and parents' attitudes towards and images of game cafés and mass LAN parties as particular expressions of values and meanings. In other words, I look at the social and cultural practices, social interactions, attitudes and statements as meaningful symbols that stand for something else, which have an intention and express certain values, norms and/or identities. Interpretations of meanings are embodied and expressed through peoples' activities, actions and interactions, as well as social processes and human cultures, all of which are core elements of the analysis of qualitative data. The task for the social researcher is to interpret the meanings of the participants' terms grounded in their everyday understandings (Hughes & Månsson, 1991) and to translate these into a social scientific analysis.

Aspers (2011) notes that ethnographic research is about producing explanations, expressed as theories but grounded in the actors' everyday meanings and understandings. He argues that the goal of social field research is to generate explanations with an aim of understanding the meanings. The social scientific and cultural understanding of a phenomenon emerges from the interpretations of peoples' intentions and meanings. Therefore, the social researcher needs to go beyond the descriptive level of data to generate and form concepts, typologies, ideas and relationships grounded in the empirical data (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Bourdieu (1999) makes a distinction between peoples' everyday concepts and the concepts of the social researcher. He notes that the social researcher should not unreflexively adopt the categories and concepts of the informants but must translate these into theoretical concepts. The everyday knowledge of people must be transformed into a social or cultural analysis.

In the concrete work, what do we mean by interpretation of the meanings and do these exist on several levels? For the analytical strategies for interpreting meanings, I follow Aspers' (2011) guidelines in fieldwork (Aspers, 2011). According to Aspers (2011), the interpretations of meanings in ethnographical fieldwork exist on two levels, first order constructions and second order constructions. The first order constructions refer to the participants' own meanings and language, based on common sense and everyday knowledge of the social phenomena. The task for the researcher is to grasp the meanings of the participants, to elicit and grasp the meanings and knowledge of the participants' use grounded in their everyday and common-sense language, experiences and understandings. The second order construction, on the other hand, involves the theoretical and conceptual meanings of participants and cultural understandings, languages and practices of the social phenomena that is in focus. The second order constructions allow the researcher to extract conceptual and theoretical meanings from the field data by suggesting a theoretical explanation grounded in people's own understandings. This allows the
researcher to establish meanings on a higher level of abstraction. Meanings can be expressed visually, through texts, observations and practices.

When working on the level of the first order of construction, I described and explored the social interactions, practices and activities in the game café and the LAN party and the informants’ own notions, ideas, values and attitudes, asking myself what these practices, statements and activities meant and symbolised for the participants. On the second order construction, I aimed at uncovering and making explicit the implicit assumptions, social and cultural values and ideas and norms that guided their practices and attitudes and that created meaningful contexts. Interpretations of meanings suggest and give directions for possible explanations and understandings of co-located game playing practices, but they are not definite, finished or fixed but rather, are always open for change.

In Agar’s (1996) discussion of the production of ethnographic accounts, he highlights the problem of the informants and how their presentations may give different accounts of how to interpret what we have seen and heard. Agar talks about the importance of paraphrasing. Paraphrasing is a powerful test to see if you have properly decoded a sentence. I used colleagues, supervisors and students to test and ‘evaluate’ my interpretations of the informants’ accounts. When time allowed, I let colleagues, supervisors and students read through my interpretations of the field observations and interviews to see if they had the same interpretations or if we came to different interpretations. Sometimes we did but not always. When that happened, I chose to present more than one interpretation.

3.11 TRANSLATIONS OF INTERVIEW QUOTES AND TALK

I had the interviews translated into English. Most of the translations were translated in the entirety, though not word by word. There is always a risk inherent when translating the interview quotes that the original meaning will get lost. Therefore, the translated quotes are presented in the original language in the appendix in the back. Some of the Swedish words could not be translated directly. Sjöblom (2011) notes that players talk almost always derives from English terms in the first place. These are often lexicalised, using Swedish terms, adding an ‘-a’ to English terms in order to transform English verbs into Swedish.

3.12 A METALUDIC DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF FIELD MATERIAL

For the analysis of newspapers articles and parents’ attitudes and talk, I draw on a metaludic discourse analysis (Ensslin, 2012). Metaludic discourse analysis can be described as language about games and game playing. Ensslin (2012) argues that language about games and gaming involves the ways in which videogames and their makers convey meaning to their audiences and the ways in which gamers and other stakeholders communicate and convey meanings among themselves. Metaludic (game- and gaming-related) discourses are performed by gamers aiming to construct identities and are mediatised (Ensslin, 2012). Following Ensslin (2012), I
discuss and highlight the unspoken values of game playing by analysing newspaper discourses on game cafes and LAN parties and computer game playing in public.

I interpret parents and staffs’ discourses as performances of identities and the newspaper articles as mediatised discourses. A discourse is used as a countable noun, signifying a range of practices not just representing the world but of signifying the world, constructing and constituting the world in meaning (Ensslin, 2012). This notion goes back to the French philosopher Foucault, who sets out to individualise discourses (such as the discourse of medicine and of psychiatry), and the feminist intellectual Butler’s (1991) notions of discourses of identity performances. Whenever we use language we automatically perform acts of identity in the sense of expressing to other people who we are and how we want to be seen and understood (Butler, 1991). Mediated discourses are performed in the press and in broadcast media. According to Ensslin (2012), the metaludic discourses in contemporary mass media are those in which stakeholders such as parents, the industry, educators, scientists, politicians and journalists and gamers themselves construct and perpetuate the social meanings of games.

3.13 FROM DATA TO THEMES

A theme can be described as a broader categorisation of the field material, but it is not a theoretical concept (Aspers, 2011). Coding is a way to break down large parts of the field material into several pieces or parts. The codes are generated either from the empirical data or theory (Aspers, 2011). The first themes that emerged from the field data were the social setting, place, social relationships and time. These themes were later adjusted, changed and iterated several times throughout the fieldwork. During coding, I was mainly looking for similarities and differences in the field material, to identify instances that could be formed as a uniting theme. I was asking what this comment or account could mean and whether these observations and utterances might form an instance of a theme. The final themes were place, settings, the senses and mass media images and public attitudes.

3.14 FROM THE SPECIFIC TO THE GENERAL

My way of using and approaching the third place did not follow a fixed, definite and rigid definition in which the empirical material had to adjust itself to suit the concept but rather the other way around. Following Blumer’s (1969) idea of ‘sensitising concepts’, the notion of a third place set out general directions and images how to think of the social reality but was always open and flexible to the distinct localities, particularities and complexities of the empirical world. Blumer defines ‘sensitising concepts’ as opposition to ‘definite concepts’. According to Blumer the relationship between the empirical world and concepts separates the sensitising concepts from definite concepts. A definite concept has clear definitions of attributes. It serves as a mean of clearly identifying the individual instance of the class. Unlike definitive concepts, sensitising concepts lack such a specification of attributes, and do not enable the reader to move directly into the empirical instance and its relevant content. Blumer (1969) argues that a sensitising concept gives a perspective or an
image through which to look at the empirical world, but lacks a precise reference and has no benchmark that allows for a clear-cut identification of a general instance. The concepts that are used are sensitive to the distinct and unique instances of the empirical field. Because of the varying nature of the concrete expression from instance to instance, we have to rely on general guides and not on fixed objective traits or modes of expressions (Blumer, 1969, p. 149). This means that we have to accept, develop and use the distinct expression for each case in order to detect and study the common elements. The researcher moves out from the concept to what is concrete and distinctive of the empirical instance, instead of embracing the instance in the abstract framework of the concepts. This is a matter of filling out a new situation or of picking one’s way in an unknown terrain (Blumer, 1969, p. 148). The concept can be checked by the empirical data and the latter ordered anew by the former (Blumer, 1969, p. 173).
In this section, I argue for an embodied perspective on co-located game play experiences, which take into account the senses such as sight, sound, taste, smell and touch. In previous studies on the senses in games, the senses have been discussed as an matter of how to support and enhance sensory experiences through various technological input devices. These studies have failed to account for how the senses are linked to the physical and social environment. The study of the senses is not only a forgotten research area in game studies but also an unexplored research area in ethnographical studies of everyday experiences, specifically in modern cities. Neo-ethnographers have missed the senses in studies of modern urban everyday life (Kalekin-Fishman & E.Y.Low, 2010). Instead, ethnographic accounts of modern cities have highlighted social customs, norms, habits, relationships, places, community, memberships and identities. However, as argued by Kalekin-Fishman and K.E.Y. Low (2010), it is notable that sensory experiences have been a neglected research area in the social sciences. Since, senses are the human aspects that are affected by the places and locations and the location of our identities.

In this work, a focus on senses involves being sensitive to the physical, cultural and local atmospheres and environments of game playing. Such an approach challenges the notions of immersion, which is described as when the players’ minds are absorbed in the games (Carr, 2006). From an anthropological perspective, the senses are not universal, but culturally specific (Figuié & Bricas, 2010).

The findings on sensory experiences should by no means be seen as final, general or solid; instead, these should be regarded as starting points and points of departure for future research. The findings are therefore preliminary, and need to be tested, evaluated and grounded in a long-term field study. The field study suggests that the local atmosphere and physical environment played an important role for the sensory co-located game play experiences such as the distinct ‘LAN-smell’, the music genres and the volume, smell and taste of fast food, candies and sodas and the sound of players slapping each other during game play, all of which shaped the social atmosphere and gave meanings to the experiences of game playing. These experiences turned the abstract space of the game café and of the LAN Party into a personal place. As noted by Kalekin-Fishman and E.Y. Low (2010), ‘what we absorb through the senses is the substance of our personal translation of abstract space into “place”’ (Kalekin-Fishman & E.Y.Low, 2010). The findings from the field studies suggest that the game café and the LAN party provide similar and different sensory game-playing experiences due to the social and spatial environments. The game café offered a relaxed and recreational game play experience afforded by the music that played softly in the background, the dimmed lights and the quiet atmosphere. The mass LAN party on the other hand aimed at creating a party atmosphere and offered a party experience by the spectacular neon light shows, the ongoing numerous stage performances and social happenings and the techno music played at high volume from the loudspeakers. However, the party atmosphere cannot be generalised to an overall LAN atmosphere. A mass LAN party offers a mix of multiply different game
play experiences that range from the sensational and spectacular to the mundane and ordinary.

Screen shopping, which refers to the activity of walking around in the long aisles watching the other players’ screens, was a common practice in the mass LAN party. This activity was supported by the long rows of computers lined up side by side, which invited spectatorship. Physical interactions between players such as slapping each other, pointing, doing high fives were also common. These are examples of how the spatial environment supports particular physical interactions between players in game play.

Playing computer games in public co-located game settings is also associated with particular tastes. Eating candies, drinking sodas and eating pizzas and toast were common tastes of the public co-located game play experiences. One of the staff told me that the game café had tried to sell more ‘healthy’ food, such as vegetarian calzones and bottled spring water for a season. However, replacing fast food with more ‘healthy’ food was rejected by the players, which suggests that public game play is linked to certain expectations and experiences such as taste and food experiences that are heavy on carbon, salt and sugar.

In previous studies of LAN parties and game cafes, co-located game play experiences have been argued as situated within and dependent upon the physical presence of other players (Swalwell, 2003). Swalwell (2003) notes that gaming experiences are reminiscent of the old non-digital gaming venues as the game play depends on the physical presence of others. In the game café, the physical presence of other players leads to particular experiences of game play. Players watched and monitored the computer screens of friends and neighbours who were sitting next to them without playing the same games. Monitoring each others’ screens was done not only for instrumental purposes to support and aid each other during collaboration, which is an important aspect of game playing in teams, but the practice also had a social meaning: to keep an eye on the neighbour’s or friend’s screens to see what they were involved in. In these senses, watching and monitoring screens can be seen as a social practice and experience. Based on these primary findings, I suggest here that the sights, smells, sounds, tastes and touch should be taken into account in embodied approaches on co-located game playing and link game playing to the local and physical environment.
In this chapter, I will engage in a critical discussion of the third place set out by Oldenburg (1999). I start this chapter by discussing and highlighting the ideas, aspects and elements of the third place, which were found to be used to understand the game café as a social setting. As a next step, I highlight the ideas and notions of the third place, which need to be adjusted and elaborated to fit the particular localities of the game café. These are the assumptions that ‘It is the regulars that set out the friendly and intimate atmosphere of a third place’ and ‘Conversation is the main activity’. As a final step, I point out the hidden assumptions on which the third place rests and the blind spots that are left out in Oldenburg’s notions of a third place. What is at stake here is not whether Oldenburg’s notions of the third place fit (or do not fit) the local particularities of the game café but rather the hidden notions and assumptions that are unspoken when discussing the third place.

Before discussing and presenting the findings in more detail, I first briefly present and summarise the main findings. The first finding, The game café has elements of a third place, is an argument that draws upon the idea that the game café features characteristics of a third place. It is a public informal setting located on neutral ground, enables visitors to feel at home despite being away from home, has a plain appearance, is accessible almost 24 hours a day and creates a playful mood. The next finding, Not only the regulars but also the staff create the lively atmosphere, argues that the staff play a central role in making a third place come alive. Accordingly, this idea challenges Oldenburg’s notion of regulars as key for creating the familiar and lively atmosphere in a third place, and the reason for why people visit a third place. The next finding, Sociability is the main activity of a third place, challenges Oldenburg’s assumption that conversation is the main activity of a third place. Therefore, this finding suggests that conversation and game playing are not separate activities but part of the same social practice. The final finding, A third place for whom?, discusses the idea of the third place as a leveller. In this section, I argue that a game café has both inclusive and exclusive elements. Moreover, since the game café is dominated by young men it is a homosocial environment. This particular environment has elements of a macho culture.

5.1 BEING A PLACE ON NEUTRAL GROUND

According to Oldenburg, a third place is on neutral ground. Being a place on neutral ground means that it is a place where people can leave and enter as they please, where no one feels obliged to play host and in which all feel at home and comfortable (Oldenburg, 1999). ‘Where neutral ground is available it makes possible far more informal, even intimate relations among people than could be entertained in the home’ (Oldenburg, 1999, p. 22–23). This argument suggests the idea of a loose, informal and social organisation of the third place, which supports specific social interactions and relationships between visitors, staff and/or participants. Grounded in the field study of the game café, I argue the game café can be viewed as
a place on neutral ground since no planned appointments in advance were needed. Usually, regulars dropped by the game café alone or in company with friends.

The comment of Tom, age 15, illustrates how the game café as a place on neutral ground was experienced and appropriated: You come here alone and when you come here you see who is here. You come here when you feel like it.

The game café was almost always accessible, not only literally but also in a concrete sense. The entrance doors often stood half open to the streets, perhaps to signal to potential customers on the streets and regulars that this was a place where you could come and go as you wished. Being a place on neutral ground, the customers could arrive and leave the game café as they pleased without feeling obliged to any host. Regulars arrived, left and returned to the game café in between and after other planned activities and appointments. Their visits were casual and unplanned.

5.2 KEEPING A LOW PROFILE

Oldenburg notes that as a physical structure, the third place is typically plain. For the most part, third places are not impressive looking. They are with a few expectations not advertised and they are not elegant (Oldenburg, 1999, p. 38). According to Oldenburg, this is a strategy to avoid attention from the mainstream population since a third place does not need such recognition.

The plain look was a striking feature of the game café. As compared to the spectacular, colourful, shiny, overtly designed and advertised shopping gallerias and stores in the city, which had the purpose to receive attention and attraction from a wider population, it seemed like the game café had no such intentions. The outlook of the game café was rather plain. From the outside, it did not stick out, 'show off' or call for attention. It did not use any spectacular and extraordinary features. The inside appearance of the game café was also rather plain. Or perhaps it is more suitable to describe the appearance of its setting as dark and rough. The dark and gloomy lights, the sparse decorated room, the black bar, tables and chairs and black leather sofas, as well as the game posters on the wall enhanced the impression of the game café as an underground scene or a subculture. The interior of the game café looked like a heavy metal rock club. The entrance was simple, a plain regular door, and the windows were covered with mesh, which made it hard to look inside. Talking to staff member Tomas, he commented that the environment of the game café was not 'nice' and pleasant. 'You do not go to this place just to have a cup of coffee'. His comment can be read as an expression to say that the game café was not an unfriendly setting but to emphasise (with perhaps even a slight hint of pride in his voice) that this setting did not conform to or appeal to the mainstream population. It had its regulars and specific segment of customers, tourists and other people who needed to use the Internet and computers.
5.3 ACCESSIBILITY

Oldenburg argues that 'third places that render the best and fullest service are those to which one may go alone at almost any time of the day or evening with assurance that acquaintances will be there. To have such a place available whenever the demons of loneliness or boredom strike or when the pressures and frustration of the day call for relaxation amid good company is a powerful resource' (Oldenburg, 1999, p. 32).

The game cafe was accessible almost any time of the day. The game café stayed open between 9:00 and 00:00 a.m. every day except for weekends. Each night, the game cafe arranged an event called night gibb2 which took place between 12:00 p.m. or midnight to 8:00 in the morning. Although, in Oldenburg's view, the available opening hours are a distinct characteristic of third places, as these places traditionally have kept long hours (Oldenburg, 1999), the opening hours in the game café resonate with the computer game culture, which is characterised by a tradition of playing for many hours whenever people feel like it. Being a public setting, the game cafe was more available and accessible than other public settings such as cafés, restaurants, night clubs or bars. For instance, most cafés stay open at the latest to 9:00 p.m., bars or night clubs usually close down after midnight during weekdays and stay open at the latest to 5:00 a.m. on weekends. The generous opening hours were an appreciated service among the informants. As one of the informants told me: 'you could drop by the game café almost any time of the day'. As a consequence, the participants were not limited by the opening hours.

David, age 17:

Fatima: 'Do you come here all by yourself?'

David: 'If I am around and I do not do something else, I stop by to see if anyone else is here'.

For the regulars, the game café was their ordinary hangout where they could expect to meet some of their friends, so they did not plan their visits in advance. They could drop in after school or during weekends to join or meet up with peers. Among the nonregulars who planned their visits in advance to the game café, the generous opening hours offered them a place to stay at almost any time of the day.

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22 During night gibbs players rent computers for the whole night.
5.4 THE MOOD IS PLAYFUL

According to Oldenburg (1999), in a third place the persistent tone is playful (Oldenburg, 1999, p. 37). Oldenburg underscores that joy and acceptance is predominant over anxiety and alienation. In Oldenburg’s view, playfulness is witty and humourous, and relies on joy and acceptance. Also, Oldenburg argues that a third place is a playground, it is a place apart. Oldenburg draws on Huizinga’s (1954) idea of the magic elements of play space and the boundaries between the playground and ordinary life. Oldenburg argues that in a third place as a playground, you can withdraw from the rest of the world within the ordinary world and reject the usual norms. In the game café, the playful mood was described by the informants as ‘to play for fun’ in contrast to ‘serious play’. ‘Serious play’ was described as a way of playing when acting as a member of a formal team, clan, guild or other formal group. These formalised groups were usually organised around a set of strict social obligations and demands that the group members had to accept as a member of a team or guild. Often, players were required to play and/or practice a certain amount of time every week.

Markus, age 16:

Now I play just for fun. I am not in a serious clan anymore. This is not serious. You play because it’s fun. To compete is fun in another way. Then, you could almost have anxiety when you played. This was not relaxing. I would say that you get tense about it. It becomes more fun when you don’t have to be the best. It is just a game. I’ve always looked upon it in this way. For some people playing games, it’s a job. Earlier, you thought you were playing for real. I do not like to play too much. I like it this way.

This example shows how Markus’ attitudes and engagement in the games changed when he was no longer playing in a clan. When he was a member of a clan, he was viewed and described as ‘playing serious’ and when he was not playing in a clan, he referred to game play as ‘playing for fun’. When Markus was part of a gaming clan, game play was perceived as a serious activity, surrounded by social demands and pressure. Markus’ experiences of being a member in a ‘serious’ clan were associated with negative emotions such as stress and anxiety. The primary goal was to win and become the best. When no longer playing in a serious clan, he describes his play as fun. Games in the game café were mostly played for fun. The difference between playing serious and playing for fun was described by another informant:

Anders, age 14: ‘When you play serious, you play all the time, but now you go to the game café from time to time and you play occasionally’.

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3 A clan refers to a team of players.
‘Playing for fun’ was also characterised by a relaxed and playful attitude towards game play. This notion of game playing resembles Huizinga’s (Huizinga, 1938) notion of play as voluntary, free, undemanding and playful activity. Teasing, laughing and joking were an inevitable part of the game play experiences when playing with friends. Another example of the playful attitude that characterised the game play practices was illustrated in the common expression, ‘This is just a game’.

Some players used the phrase ‘this is just a game’ if their friends were getting ‘too’ upset. One evening I was sitting with a group of friends playing DotA. I followed them as they played a match. One of the players, Tommy (age 17), was constantly commenting on his and his friends’ game-playing practices during game play.

Tommy: ‘That is Easy Mode. Ha ha, you can definitely tell when you play against the “rat” because it is on Easy Mode. Ha ha. What have I done? Because they do not know how to play the game’.

One of the boys in the opposite team pointed out that he could not kill an opponent because he could not click on his character.

Tommy: ‘Stop lying. You can click on all characters.

‘I do not need Illusion to master.’ Stop whining, Anders, are you gay? Ha ha, this is a very mature gank (ganking is to kill another player for no reason). Cool cat is rocking’.

A player in the opposite team shouted out loud, ‘Nooo’.

Tommy: ‘What is happening. Are you upset? It is just a game’.

This example illustrates the playful attitude taken by Tommy, when telling his counter player who is his friend to ‘stop whining, this is just a game’. Tommy’s comment can also be seen as an ironic comment to tell his friend to not take the game seriously, to avoid becoming too emotionally involved in the game and to hold his distance. Also, this example supports notions of game playing as involving bullying, conflict and ridiculing of friends. Tommy is pointing out and bullying his friend who is in the opposite team when he says, ‘I do not need Illusion to master. Stop whining, Anders, are you gay?’

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4 An Illusion is a spell.

5 Ganking is to kill another player unprovocatively.
5.5 A HOME AWAY FROM HOME

According to Oldenburg (1999), a third place is homelike in its character. Oldenburg, who refers to the psychologist Seamons’ ideas, argues that a third place is a substitute for home but can also be a home, feeling more home-like than home, being appropriate as a home (this is my place), in which to unwind, where there is a freedom to be and there is warmth. The notion of a third place as a home away from home was supported in the field study of game café when talking with regulars. The game café was a place where regulars could unwind, where they felt comfortable and relaxed. For the regulars who had been customers for many years, the game café had turned into a personal and familiar place, it had become ‘their’ hangout where they popped in when they had nothing else to do or to gather with friends.

5.6 A THIRD PLACE HAS EXCLUSIVE ELEMENTS

According to Oldenburg (1999), a third place is a leveller. A leveller is by its nature an inclusive place. It is accessible to the general public and does not set formal criteria of membership and exclusion. Third places serve to expand possibilities. This means that a third place counters the tendency to be restrictive in the enjoyment of others by being open to all and by laying emphasis on qualities not confined to status distinction in the society (Oldenburg, 1999, p. 23). This contradicts any tendencies for individuals to select their associates’ friends and intimates among those closest in their social rank. A leveller is equal by its nature, and erases social hierarchies and social divisions.

Several studies of game cafés have pointed out elements of affinity and equality. For instance, in her study of wang bas in China, Liu (2009) argues that players are there for a sense of being ‘equals’, since in this context they are free from the social hierarchies and competition that characterises the ‘real world’ market economy in China. In a similar vein, Gajadhar et al. (2009) highlight the welcoming and inclusive environment of game cafés, arguing that participants like to join other people to play a game session, and are open to meet and play with other people and join a larger group. These studies support Oldenburg’s idea of the third place as a place for community, affinity and inclusiveness. Surprisingly, few studies bring up the exclusive elements of game playing in game cafés such as closed communities of players and between players and nonplayers and between player groups. However, there are some expectations from this. Sjöblom (2011) criticises these one-sided notions of co-located game playing, which are commonly seen to be inclusive practices and community nurturing, arguing that co-located game playing has a double-sided nature. Sjöblom points out that competitiveness, stratification and hierarchies are part and parcel of game playing (Sjöblom 2011: 70). Players routinely bully and ostracise co-players and counter-players. His idea is that game playing is both inclusive and exclusive. The double-sided nature of game playing was also noticed in the game café. Although players were supportive, accepting, inclusive and helpful, often I could hear players on the same or opposing teams blaming each other, singling each other out and ridiculing each other. In matches, it was common
to hear friends put the blame on each other despite ‘playing for fun’. The following is an example of a blaming situation when two boys are playing DotA.

Markus: ‘No. Shit, now on, on. Now ok, now on’.
Calle: ‘What?’
Markus: ‘If you had not’.
Calle: ‘If you had not what?’
Markus: ‘Had been like you are. I Silenced’.
Calle: ‘No no no. Wait’.
Markus: ‘Ohh shit, they are darkening. Here I am coming. I will come and get them. Why don’t you have anybody at the fortress?’ He stared at Calle.
Markus: ‘Come on. Stop’.
Calle: ‘I have not started yet’.
Markus: ‘YOU have to play the game’.
Calle: ‘I am on my way’.
Markus: ‘YOU must tell me’.
Calle: ‘But you have to look’.
Markus: ‘What did you say?’
Calle: ‘You have to look’.
Markus: ‘But you have to tell me’.
Calle: ‘Slow down a bit’.

In this particular game play situation, characterised by intensity and stress, the boys were expected to hold their attention and to stay focused, coordinate their activities and to take actions. When they missed or failed to accomplish a task, their mistakes were pointed out such as Calle, who blamed Markus for not paying attention to the game. Sjöblom (2011), who speaks about the blame game, which postulates that blame and blame negotiations are features of co-located game playing and highlights that players’ conversations during and also in between game sessions are confrontational and harshly disaffiliating. This suggests that players’ moods are not always playful or friendly. Rather, they shift between frustration, angerness, disappointment, joy, happiness and relief and supportive to a harsh and confrontational language. I observed and noticed players who were making fun of each other, being ironic, sarcastic and criticising each other using a confrontational language such as you are lousy, you suck, you are so bad, I own you and so on.
It is also important to recognise that the game play not only expanded social possibilities such as when players started to talk with strangers and some even led to friendships, but also limited social possibilities. Most peer groups were not open to socialising with other people beyond their friends. Peer groups were rather closed communities, and often acted exclusively towards other peer groups. They rarely invited people who were not part of the peer group to join their games. I also noticed that the staff did not help beginners. In the game café, people were expected to have a certain amount of gaming experience of how to use the computers. The staff was not there to guide, instruct or assist beginners. Beginners had to ask for help from friends and peers. Beginners, just as non-players, had a lower position in the game café compared to the casual and hard-core players. For those with no interest in online and network computer games and game playing, the game café was a rather closed and exclusive setting.

5.7 COPING WITH EVERYDAY LIFE

Oldenburg (1999) argues that a third place offers relief and shelter from the stress and tension in everyday life. However, according to Oldenburg, the aspect of escape from home and work should not be the main focus, because the notion of escape focuses on conditions external to a third place and too little upon its internal relationships and affordances, which define a third place. During the field study of the game café, it became clear that the relation between the game café and home and school was important to understand the use and meanings of the game café. At home, the informants were not allowed to play games without time restrictions. This does not imply that the young men could play games as long or as much as they wanted in the game café. Often, I observed young men who were called by their parents to come home for dinner. Some of the players were not allowed to go to the game café more than a certain number of times a month. The staff told me that some parents asked the staff to restrict their kids’ times on games when staying in the game café. One dad had asked them to close down the son’s account after seven in the evening. In other words, the game café was not a free zone from parents, as several studies have pointed out (Gajadhar, et al., 2009; Liu, 2009). Going to the game café was not always an escape from everyday life but was for many players a way to handle and to confront the problems of everyday life.

Tony, age 23:

As long as the escape is used to handle the everyday problem I do not see this (playing games) as a problem. It is when the escape takes control and one cannot handle the everyday life. Such as the nerd who plays always. Most people who I know who play games are studying, working, having a social life and do sport.

For some informants, the game café was a practical solution to cope with everyday problems. For one of the young men, by staying in the game café, he had his own time that did not conflict with his mother’s leisure time.
Fredrik, age 19: 'This is a good place for me to relax. If my mum is at home, I stay here for some time. She has her time at home and I have my time here'.

Fatima: 'Does she know that you are here?'

Fredrik: 'Yes. She usually come by and sees me before she starts to work. And she comes after. We talk for a bit before she goes back to work'.

By staying in the game café, this informant's leisure time did not intersect with his mother's time schedule. The game café became a solution to an everyday problem, the management and restriction of the leisure time. This example may suggest that the game café provides a public place that supports young people's availabilities to a meaningful leisure time and place. Youth researchers have pointed out that young people have restricted resources in terms of places, time and money (Skelton, 1998).

5.8 REGULARS AND STAFF MAKE A THIRD PLACE COME ALIVE

In Oldenburg’s idea of a third place, the regulars play a central role of creating the atmosphere in a third place. According to Oldenburg (1999), it is the regulars who define the atmosphere of a third place, and who make a third place come alive. He argues that what attracts the regulars to a third place is not offered by the management but by the fellow customers. 'It is the regulars who give the place its character and who assure that at on any given visit some of the gang will hang there. It is the regulars, whatever their number on any given occasion, [...] who set the tone of conviviality' (Oldenburg, 1999, p. 34). Moreover, Oldenburg (1999) argues that the lone stranger is most likely to become a regular. Oldenburg’s idea of regulars’ resemblances to the regulars in the pub life was portrayed in the American situation comedy television series Cheers, which was broadcast in the 1980s and 1990s. In this comedy show, all regulars were portrayed as lone strangers who had gotten to know each other in the pub and had become like a family.

In the field study of the game café, a rather different idea of the regulars became visible. A significant numbers of regulars stayed with their friends. Many regulars stayed with friends, who were often teenage boys. It was also common that the regulars among groups of friends were less likely to interact with other players and customers who did not belong to their close circle of friends. These regulars usually stayed with their friends when they stayed in the game café, hardly talking with staff or other players. Regulars, consisting of teenage boys in groups of friends, often yelled or talked loudly during game play. The staff labelled them as "CS-kids", an abbreviation for CounterStrike-kids. They were boys in the range of 13–14 years old who liked to play first-person shooter games such as CounterStrike, or strategy role-playing games such as DotA, a mode of Warcraft 3 by Blizzard. The staff had mixed feelings about this group of players since they saw them as potential customers and at the same time perceived them as immature and noisy, which were not what they wished.
During the field study of the game café, it became clear that the staff and not only the regulars contributed to the informal atmosphere in the game café. Often, I noticed that the staff was chit chatting and joking with the customers. Staff often hung around with customers, talking and chit chatting with them while they were playing, if they were not busy cleaning up, checking on the computers or standing at the cash register. For instance Sebbe, one of the employees at the game café, had been working at the game cafe since it opened. He was hard to ignore; he was tall, had a proud walk and a bossy tone, and he usually wore a heavy keychain that clanked each time he arrived or passed by. He often spoke in a loud tone, joking and laughing with the regulars. He seemed to know almost everyone at the game café. Sebbe certainly played an important role in shaping the conviviality and familiar tone in the game café. Several players told me that they liked the staff and had picked the game café because of them. The regulars displayed the significance of staff for the familiar atmosphere.

Fredrik, age 19:

Fredrik: ‘First, I like the staff. I get along with them well’.

Fatima: ‘What do you like about the fees?’

Fredrik: ‘It is ok. The fees are expensive but I feel more fine here than in other places’.

Fatima: ‘What do you like about this place?’

Fredrik: ‘I like the staff. The atmosphere’.

The informal and familiar tone among regulars and between staff and regulars set the personal and familiar tone in the game café. This informal and familiar tone may be explained by the fact that the staff were gamers as well. Therefore, their roles and relationships were not based on a traditional relationship of employee and customers. The staff did not act as authorities (although they acted and performed as authorities in certain situations), rather, they acted as peers and co-players. Being a gamer could also be beneficial when working as the staff. Marie, one of the staff members, told me, ‘Then you have similar experiences as the customers and you can help people if they get a problem with the games’. The staff certainly played an important role in establishing the familiar and intimate atmosphere in the game café. This was supported by several regulars who told me that they had been to other game cafes but they preferred this game café because they liked the staff. Beavis, Nixon and Atkinson (2005), in their study on LAN cafés in Melbourne, with a focus on learning aspects, argue that little attention has been paid to the staff, management and co-workers in game cafés. This section has discussed the role of staff and relationships between staff and customers.
Oldenburg (1999) argues that conversation is the main activity of a third place, and which he defines as pleasurable and entertaining good lively talk, where the style of conversation is more important than the vocabulary. Conversation in a third place is lively, engaging, colourful and even better than in other places. Other activities are, according to Oldenburg, subordinated or proceed within conversations. The question then is what happens with Oldenburg’s idea of conversation as the main activity within the social setting of the game café, where the social life to a significant part centres on game playing and the participants’ common interests in games. Also, a crucial question that must be asked is what happens with Oldenburg’s notion of sociability being limited to conversations within the context of co-located game playing? In an attempt to not dismiss conversation as a significant activity, but without losing sight of game play, I view game playing and conversation as deeply intertwined, constantly shaping one another. For this reason, social activities, practices and experiences of co-located game playing should not be regarded as or limited to mere conversations or talk, nor should these practices be reduced to instrumental game play such as progressing, achievements, challenges, exploration, collaboration or competing. From this perspective, co-located game playing and conversation cannot be entirely separated, although they are not exactly the same. These two practices exist through and define each other. Game playing without conversation would reduce the experiences of co-located game playing to an individual and instrumental activity. Conversation without game playing would be chit chatting or merely talk. My point is that game playing and conversation are part of the same activity: sociability. Therefore, I would argue for a perspective on sociability that is limited to neither conversations nor game playing but instead involves both. In my view, I take into account the diverse and shifting social interactions, practices and activities that people are engaged in when playing games in a game café.

Several researchers have pointed out the communicative features of co-located game play (Ackermann, 2010a, 2010b; Ensslin, 2012; Sjöblom, 2011). Ensslin (2012) notes that computer games are spoken and communicated. This was clear in this study. On the one hand, the talk and conversations of players are central features of co-located game-playing practices and experiences, since games and game play clearly dominate players’ conversations as well as leads to conversations. However conversations also emerge in and during game play. Conversations while playing turn computer game play into a distinct social activity as compared to other media activities such as watching a film in the movie theatre with friends.
Björn, age 22:

It is more fun to play with friends. Yes, much more fun. Because then you talk about the games. Many times we go out and game and then we go for a beer in a pub and we go to a friend’s and hang. And we talk. It is a little like going to the movies. But going to the cinema is less social. You talk about the movie afterwards. But here you can talk while you are playing and after. But it is rare that you play all the time, that you just game. You play and eat and then go to a friend’s and you talk about everything.

Björn points out that talking with friends about the games during game play makes playing computer games to be a distinct social activity as compared to watching a film in the movie theatre, since in the movie theatre, talking often occurs after or before the activity. It must be noted that it is unclear whether this informant spoke of face-to-face or online communication. Since this young man does not make a distinction between online and offline, it seems like these distinctions are not important for him to make. My intention is not to deny the distinct discursive and communicative features and processes between face-to-face and online communications (Ackermann, 2010a; Ensslin, 2012); however, for my research purpose to understand the meanings of co-located game play in public and the game café as a social phenomenon, I do not make an analytical distinction between these communicative forms, as I regard both face-to-face and online game communication as social practices and ways of sociability.

The social potential of games was recognised by Oldenburg. In his view, games stimulate conversations and thus have a social potential. ‘Conversation is a game that mixes well with other games according to the manner they are played. The talk enhances the card game, the card gaming giving eternal stimulation to the talk’ (Oldenburg, 1999, p. 31). According to Oldenburg, sociability is subject to good and proper forms of conversation. Oldenburg’s notion of sociability draws on George Simmels’ notion of ‘pure sociability’:

Sociability is a mean for the affinity, for the joy and relief of gathering together. The notion of pure sociability goes beyond the contexts of purpose, duty, or role. It allows for democratic experiences as people can be themselves. (Oldenburg, 1999, p. 26)

My perspective on sociability does not follow in the footstep of Oldenburg's notion of pure sociability, which draws on Simmels' concept, which is reduced to the 'happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work' (Oldenburg, 1999, p. 16). In my perspective, sociability does not need to be limited to the happily anticipated gatherings of individual. It can include social hierarchies, competitions, social divisions and power demonstrations. Although co-located game playing certainly supports and aims at creating affinity and friendly acts in cooperative play, for example when players send and give items to each other, show paths, warn each other, give instructions and guide each other. In my view, sociability can involve blaming, disputes and conflicts. A common expression among the young players is I own you, a comment (despite being playful) that symbolises
an unequal relationship. Therefore, my argument is that the main activity in the game café is not conversation but rather sociability. Sociability is the core social activity, which cuts across, forms and shapes and gives meanings to players’ gameplaying practices and activities that evolve in the game café. This practice can take different expressions and interactions such as when players greet their peers by asking what activities they are involved in instead of asking how they are doing – ‘Hey, are you ganking’. Other situations, such as when people are watching their friends’ game play, or when friends are playing a match, collaborating or competing, watching friends and peers play, talking about games and sitting together side by side, are other social key features of the game café. Sociability also includes situations such as when four or five friends come together to the game café, play for five or six hours and after they go for a beer in a pub.

5.10 HANGING OUT IN THE GAME CAFÉ

This form of sociability can be described as hanging out. Hanging out is a social practice that characterises game playing that is performed and enjoyed with friends and peers. Oldenburg was critical of the notion of hangout as it was associated with images of the joint or dive, places for low people. For this reason, Oldenburg preferred the term the third place, as it emphasised being a public setting where friends get together away from the restrictions at home and at work (Oldenburg, 1999, p. 15).

By emphasising hanging out rather than sociability, my intention is to highlight the way co-located game playing in public is embedded within existing friend and peer cultures. Previous studies have highlighted how playing games in a game café is not an individual isolated activity set apart from existing peer cultures (Chee, 2006; Lin, 2005; Liu, 2009). Ito (2009) notes that computer gaming in general is associated more with social integration than isolation. Similar findings have been reported in studies of youth and teens’ media consumption (Livingstone, 2009; Linderoth, 2007).

In this work, the term to ‘hang out’ is a strategy to underscore and highlight the relationship between public game playing and peer cultures. Playing games in a game café is embedded within local friends and peer cultures and, therefore, hanging out is an inevitable part of youth leisure and must be understood as a peer practice (Harrison & Morgan, 2005). Hanging out can be described using teens’ own descriptions as simply ‘chilling’, ‘kicking back’, ‘hanging around’ or ‘just being’ (Harrisson & Morgan, 2005). The field study of the game café suggests that co-located game playing in the game café is a way of hanging out with friends and socialising around a common activity. This notion of game play supports studies of media participation among youth. Ito (2009) argues that gaming has become a key part of what we have identified as casual hanging out and killing time practices. In a large-scale study of middle and high school students’ participation with new media in the US (Horst, Herr-Stephenson, & Robinson, 2010), the authors note that the students they interviewed expressed a desire to ‘hang out’, to meet friends and to ‘just be’. According to Horst et al. (2010), casual interpersonal interactions are
primary to hanging out. Harrison and Morgan (2005) note that from an adult perspective, teens appear often to be doing nothing when they hang out. However, from a teen’s perspective, hanging out involves various complex social practices (Harrison & Morgan, 2005). Harrison and Morgan (2005) argue that hangouts in public become safe places for teens to constitute and to try out relationships and interpersonal competence away from their families, school and work places (Harrison & Morgan, 2005). This work suggests that hanging out is one of the core practices that define and give meaning to co-located game playing in game cafés and LAN parties. However, hanging out is not unique for co-located computer game play in game cafés and among its participants but can also be found in other leisure, peer-oriented practices and settings such as sport bars, bowling bars, boule-bars or cafés. Hanging out suggests that a third place is not only made up by regulars and staff but is situated within a peers and friends culture.

5.11 A THIRD PLACE FOR WHOM?

What follows from the findings of this work is the suggestion that a game café has elements of a third place as it supports and nurtures communities and sociability, social network and togetherness within a local peer and friend culture. For the participants – the players – the game café is used to escape and unwind from the pressure and tension of home and school, a place to retreat and hang out with friends. For this group of players the game café has become their place, a place of their own. However, this notion is not straightforward as this study has shown that the game café also has elements of exclusiveness (is exclusive towards women and elderly players), is ranked in social hierarchies (players are ranked by experiences and skills) and conflicts and disputes. While being valuable for pointing out that public life creates and produces communities, social relationships and personal relationships, the concept of third place erases less ‘pleasant’ elements such as notions of conflict, social hierarchies and exclusion. What cannot be included in the third place are notions of social constraints, power relationships’ inequalities and homophobia.

Oldenburg’s romantic and naïve vision in which the third place incorporates dreams of a vital and dynamic democracy resembles the pre-modern rural society that Tönnies referred to as Gemeinschaft (Tönnies, 1988). Gemeinschaft rests on ideas of a collective will, togetherness, belonging, family traditions, solidarity and shared values. In contrast to Gemeinschaft, geselleshieft represents the formal, impersonal and distanced relationships characterising modern urban life. In a similar line of thought, Oldenburg's (1999) ideas of a third place put forward notions such as the common good, democracy and community while conflicts, social divisions, hierarchies, exclusion and power relationships are erased or hidden. Rather than regarding these features as fallacies and misfits of public life, these are inevitable elements of urban public life and need to be highlighted in an analysis of the public life to avoid false assumptions and accounts. Then, a question that needs to be asked arises: Does any true third place really exist, which is inclusive towards all groups of players, those who do not belong to the avid teenage or young male players? In this study, it has been shown that the third place does not take into account women
exclusiveness, adult control and monitoring. The game café supports a particular game culture that includes bullying and ostracising friends. It is possible to assume from these findings that the game café functions as a third place for a particular group of men, but only privileged and powerful young men, as third places historically always have been.

Another question that must be asked is if the third place draws on a utopian and nostalgic dream of public, informal social life, what then is the motive of using this concept at all? By conducting an in-depth study of the social and cultural processes and social relationships in a game café, I was able to identify which elements and features of the third place were found to be useful and relevant to understanding the game café. Perhaps more important, I was also able to uncover and make visible its blind spots and unspoken notions of a third place where Oldenburg's assumptions were proved to be false and shallow.

6 THE CONSTRUCTIONS OF CO-LOCATED GAME PLAYING

Previous studies of parents' views of game/Internet cafes in Asia (Liu, 2009; Lin 2007) have reported on moral panics or negative attitudes towards Internet cafés and playing games in public by stakeholders such as parents, by the mass media and government. In a study of game/Internet cafés in Taiwan, it was shown that these settings are viewed as dangerous places associated with criminals and drugs and regarded as morally suspect by the government, the media and parents (Lin, 2005). In contrast to their studies, this study suggests that the mass media's images and attitudes towards game cafés and mass LAN parties are framed positively. The study shows that the mass media constructs game playing in game cafés and LAN parties centre around two major images, as a 'professional gaming and game players’ and the LAN party as a ‘playground and practice for socialising, fun and partying’. This study also put forward the traditional values and attitudes towards playing computer games in general and playing games in game cafés and LAN parties in particular by parents. The study shows that playing games is connected to a wider adult and parental concern over how, where and with whom youth should spend their leisure. In contrast to assumptions of game cafés as spaces free from the monitoring and intervention of parents, this study shows that these settings are adult controlled and under surveillance.

6 Oldenburg discusses the lack of women and youth in third places, but ignores how to make third places into 'true' third places, inclusive for women and other excluded groups. His idea of 'sexes' draws on traditional female and male roles where men and women are perceived as different and as such need third places of their own to withdraw from homes and marriage.
7 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

We have come to an end of this dissertation where conclusions will be made and discussed. This chapter is structured after the research questions, which have guided us throughout this work both implicitly and explicitly:

*In what practices are people involved when staying in a game café? What does playing computer games in a game café mean for the people who are involved in these practices? What is the main activity in the game café? What kind of social setting is the game café?*

Players in a game café are involved in a diverse range of social practices and experiences, which foster, support and nurture peer and friend cultures and networks. To the players, playing games in a game café is a focus for hanging out with local friends. Being a place for hanging out, this study suggests that the core practice in the game café is hanging out. However, this term not only recognises communities, affiliations and togetherness but also social hierarchies, disaffiliations and power relationships. This study has shown that the game café is a homosocial environment, which is exclusive towards women, shows elements of homophobia and is monitored and under surveillance by adults and parents. Seen in this light, the game café works as a third place but only for a limited group of people, young men who share an interest in playing online and network computer games in public.

*Who are the participants, the inhabitants of the game café? What are their roles and relationships? Why do players visit and stay in a game café in the first place, what are their needs and motivations?*

In section 5.3, *Regulars*, it was shown that the people who populate this setting are young men, regulars, nonregulars and the staff. The relationships between staff and players shifted between being based on friendly, buddy-like, personal and equal relationships and an unequal relationship in those situations such as when staff are taking the role of authorities or parents by monitoring and regulating players’ times spent on playing games. Study 1 shows that there are several motives for visiting and staying in the game café. Players go to the game café to socialise with friends and peers, to escape and relax from home and work and get access to the computer equipment, computer games and fast broadband connection.

*In which ways are co-located game playing in public experienced through the senses? Is there a difference between the sensory experiences of game play in a game café and a mass LAN party? How does the social environment support various kinds of sensory experiences?*

Co-located game playing in public is experienced through sight, and includes such activities as walking around watching other players’ screens and game play. This activity is common and popular among players. Game playing is also experienced through the smells emerging from thousands of people gathered together in a limited spatial area, including sweat and, the odours of fast food and unwashed clothes. Game playing in public is also experienced through the sounds of the music.
in the loudspeakers in the game café and the mass LAN party. The volume and the
music genre establish a distinct atmosphere in public settings such as the game café
and the LAN party. The taste of sodas, energy drinks and fast food and candies, along
with the such sensations as poking the legs, shoulders and arms of peers and friends
also shaped the game play experiences. Some of these experiences were similar in
the game café and a mass LAN party while others were different because of the
differences in the social and spatial layouts of the game café and the mass LAN party.
This study suggests that the senses play a significant role in understanding the
meanings and contexts of co-located game play in public.

What are parents’ attitudes towards playing computer games in public? How are mass
LAN parties represented in the mass media?

In Study 4, I suggested that when game playing is seen as a children’s leisure activity,
whether played at home or in public, it can be perceived and constructed either as
problematic or not by parents. Parents’ attitudes towards playing games in game cafés rested on traditional values of play. For instance, outdoor activities were more
highly valued than indoor activities. Playing co-located games was also perceived as
a threat to family relationships, to face-to-face interactions and young people’s
ordinary life routine. In contrast, such play was highlighted as positive if it supported local peer relationships and could be used for the future career and
support the local neighbourhood. Parents’ values and ideas were linked to a concern
regarding young people’s organisation of time spent on leisure activities. In the mass
media, co-located game playing in LAN parties and game cafés was constructed as a
sport or for fun, socialising with friends and as a chance to party. Although these
images and constructions do not draw on mass media alarm reports of game playing,
we still have to be cautious about the social values and images these represent.
These images reproduce traditional gender stereotypes linking professional gaming
to young men, while playing for fun, being with friends and partying is considered an
activity for both women and men where women become visible as game players.

7.1 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The descriptive accounts and findings of the dissertation are to a large extent
influenced by the design of the field study. In the literature on fieldwork and
ethnography, the question of generalising from a few cases has been a common topic
in the debate on ethnographical work. Is it possible or even desirable to generalise
the results grounded in a single case or in a few cases to a larger population or
cases? Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) note that how this should be dealt with is
dependent on whether the research is directed towards the development and testing
of a theory or towards a generalisation about a finite population of cases. If the goal
of the research is theory development, the strategic selection of cases is important.
In this case, the researcher has to identify the most typical cases studied. As argued
by Burgess (2000), this issue is irrelevant since the point of conducting a field study
is to identify the local, situated patterns, particularities and localities.
What are the limitations of the results from the field study located in one game café and one specific LAN party? Would the results have been different if I had selected another game café or if I had located the field study across several game cafés? I believe the social processes, relationships and practices would not have changed significantly if I had located the field study in another game café in Stockholm. Despite some internal variations and differences in interior, decor, layout and game titles, it is reasonable to assume that the social processes and relationships are similar across game cafés, as field studies of game play in other geographical locations have shown similar social processes and patterns.

For the most part, I conducted the field study of the mass LAN party in one particular area of the event, the Bring Your Own Computer (BYOC) section. The competitions and commercial booths were excluded. This choice has consequences for the findings and the field study. The results cannot be generalised to the entire event. The mass LAN party is a myriad of various spatial places, interests, actors, intentions, motives, meanings, game genres and technologies. However, a massive LAN party is huge in scale and so some selections must be done. It is hard to capture everything that takes place in a mass LAN party with more than 10,000 visitors spread over four halls. I believe that my account of the experiences from Dreamhack, which was located mostly in the BYOC area, provide some suggestions and perspectives, but calls for a further in-depth study of this or similar contexts.

In view of the fact that the field material was collected six years ago, a question that is relevant to ask is whether these results are still valid. I believe that these findings are still relevant because social and cultural processes and the lives of game players are slowly changing. In spite that, we have seen that the game café changed in terms of the spatial interior, layout and the menu several times during the field study. On the other hand, the social processes and relationships were rather persistent and did not change as quickly. Social processes do not change as rapidly as computer technologies and spatial interiors.

There are several things that I would have done differently with regard to the design and setup of the fieldwork if I could have started all over again. First of all, I would have conducted a pre-study as a strategy to identify and outline patterns, ideas and themes, through which I could go deeper into the main field study. In an early phase of the field study, I would identify and contact key persons, who could assist, introduce and guide me to other important persons and accompany me to informal social key events, activities and practices and the sources of stories, which otherwise could take me months to find or perhaps never find. Also, I would take a more proactive role when staying in the field. I would ask more questions directly, involve staff and management and I would follow the same groups of players for a longer time. Most of the time when staying in the game café, I observed what people were doing as a strategy to avoid ‘interfering’ in the social activities and the local culture of the game café. Paradoxically, my decision to take a more passive role as a field researcher rests on the assumption that my participation in the field would interfere or influence the social interactions and life in the game café and thus influence the findings. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) call this methodological perspective...
naturalism, in which social reality is viewed in a natural untouched state and the researcher is assumed to stay in the background.

On the other hand, textbooks on fieldwork and participant observations constantly argue that field researchers can and should participate in the field. However, they need to stay reflexive and reflect on their role and participation while in the field. A more fruitful and perhaps more strategic way to approach the field is to be more active when staying in the field. A consequence of my decision to stay in the background was that I was viewed as an outsider when staying in the game café. I did not become one of ‘them’.

7.2 FUTURE WORK

This dissertation has provided a sociological account and understanding of the social and cultural contexts and meanings of playing co-located computer games and the game café as a particular social setting. In this work, I have performed a critical examination of the third place. I have also argued for a perspective on embodied game play that takes into account the sensory experiences and perceptions of game play such as touch, sight, smell, taste and sound. So where can we go from here? What directions and paths could be taken for future research?

Because public game playing and game contexts continue to be the focus of research and research development, I will propose some suggestions for future research with regard to game play in public and public game settings. The first suggestion would be to explore the spatial organisation of gender relationships in public game settings.

Based on this study and previous studies, it has been noted that gender identities and relationships are shaping factors for the spatial organisation and access to LAN cultures in the public contexts of game cafés and mass LAN parties. Several studies including this one have pointed out the predominance of boys and young men populating game cafés and LAN parties (Gajadhar, et al., 2009; Jansz & Martens, 2005; Swalwell, 2003), while women players in these settings are almost absent. Gender is still a limited area of research in game studies despite some significant work having been done (Bryce & Rutter, 2003a). A focus on how men’s relationships are performed, maintained and/or transgressed in game play could be conducted to understand the social and spatial organisation of gender. In studies on gender and leisure, it is argued that men’s physical activity is about sport and competition, about building masculinity and learning to take up space in an aggressive and domineering way (Wellard, 2005). Wellard (2005) notes how physical activity is about sport and competition, about building masculinity and learning to take up space in an aggressive and domineering way. In a study of bodily performances in sports, Wellard (2005) talks about ‘exclusive masculinity’, which is expressed through bodily displays. Bodily displays signal to the opponents or spectators a particular version of masculinity based upon aggressiveness, competiveness, power and assertiveness (Wellard, 2005). Are similar cultural processes at work in public co-located computer game play cultures? Based on this work, it seems reasonable to
assume that a very traditional masculinity is being reproduced in computer game cultures. But is this really so and in this case, in which ways? Further studies could investigate how men’s relationships and game play cultures are organised, structured and performed in public game play settings, and how masculinities are produced, maintained and challenged.

Another direction that could be taken, with regards to gender relationships and performances in game play, could focus on young women and girls’ participation and performances in public game settings. How do women players act and negotiate their roles and identities as game players in public places? What roles do they take, how are they perceived by the male players, how do they use the public space? Previous studies on women’s participation in public game settings have pointed out how females are likely to take traditional feminine roles, such as mothers accompanying their sons or women playing the role of cheer leaders or supporting their boyfriends during game tournaments (Bryce & Rutter, 2003a). Bryce and Rutter (2003) note that the male dominance in public game spaces makes female gamers felt unwelcomed or threatened. This, together with the perception that gaming is a male leisure activity, reinforces stereotypical notions towards female gamers from male gamers and creates psychological constraints to female participation in public game spaces (Bryce & Rutter, 2003). On the other hand, female game play clans can be seen as possibilities of resistance and challenges to societal notions of the gendered appropriateness of game playing (Bryce & Rutter, 2003a).

Another future research path on public game settings that could be taken is a focus on class. Studies on game cafés in Asia have argued that game cafés are populated mostly by migrants and the lower classes. In these studies, findings have shown that students do not go to these places as these are populated by the lower classes. Future research could investigate if we can see similar attitudes and patterns of class segregation in game cafes and mass LAN parties in Sweden and/or across Europe. Are game cafés populated by the working classes or middle class? A quantitative study of game cafés and LAN parties in Europe could investigate the social demographics of the players such as their socio-economical backgrounds and ethnicities.

Another research path to take for future research on co-located game playing and places is to further explore the senses. As I have already underscored, the study of the senses draws on a small empirical material, and so the findings should be seen as primary and initial. A follow-up study on mass media representations and parents’ values and attitudes towards co-located game play needs to be conducted to determine whether the findings of this study are supported or rejected. Is there any difference between the representations of computer game play tabloids and daily newspapers?

With regards to the senses, a complementary field study in a game café and/or a mass LAN party is needed to be conducted to reach a fuller understanding of the ways the senses work and give meanings to co-located game playing experiences. Such a study could explore the way the particular tastes of music, sounds, food, and
smell are organised and constructed meaningfully by players and the role they play in their game play experiences. A long-term study on the ways the senses give meaning to the experiences and practices of co-located game playing should be a relevant topic for future research.


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