UPPSALA UNIVERSITET

Department of Informatics and Media

Master's Programme in Social Sciences,
Digital Media, and Society specialization

Two-year Master's Thesis

Activism in MMORPGs: A case study of the MapleStory player boycott

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[June 2022]

Abstract

This thesis explores how online gaming has become a central tool for networked social movements to participate in consumer activism. I look at the case study of MapleStory: a Korean MMORPG game and their consumer activism efforts started by the players. Migrating from different social media channels to organize, coordinate and strategize ways to create change within their group, through using consumer activism techniques such as boycotting, protesting and spreading information. I framed this group as an early example of a networked social movements and analyzed their usage of social groups to spread activism messages. Through the internet and new technologies members were able to find their own political voices and teach others how to protest for social change. I also concentrated on the social aspect of these communities and how they fostered social bonds through collective action and participation. I argue that online gaming has become a platform that enables consumers to protest against a company's mal practices by utilizing their positions as consumers of a product.

Key words: Gaming, Consumer Activism, Networked Social Movements, Digital Activism, Fandom, Participation, Consumerism, Globalization, Boycotting, Internet studies, social movements, Participatory politics.

Word Count: 20,152

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Preface

The inspiration for this work comes from a game that has had many personal memories for me, as it was my first introduction into the world of online gaming and has been there through my years of growing up on the internet. I have met many amazing people and created lifelong relationships, MapleStory will always have a nostalgic place in my heart.

I have seen the game transform over the years from an early social MMORPG, focusing on party play to more individualistic forms of progression. I have not always participated in discussions around Nexon as a company but was aware of their mal practices, as well as experiencing the same issues these players are concerned about. I believe this thesis adds to an already emerging conversation on how MMORPGs are spaces of meaning making, cultural production and activism, there is space for a lot more research to be done and I hope this thesis provides a conversation starter on how gaming can be a platform for activism and community discussions to take place. When people are passionate about something they are able to create change.

I would like to thank my parents, best friends and sisters, Sagal, Fatima, Samia & Idil for supporting my decision to move to another country and to finish this master's degree.
Thank you to my partner in crime Sibel for keeping me sane throughout this writing process, we were toxic influences on each other, but we made it. Thank you to my best friend Jacob for not letting me give up and for inspiring me to pick a topic I was passionate about. To my supervisor Siddharth for encouraging me despite the chaos and for the constructive feedback sessions.

To my best friend and soulmate Jocke, thank you for supporting me in every way, through my ups and downs you have been my constant. The late-night writing sessions were more bearable with you there to make me laugh.

Lastly, I would like to thank my cat Yuji for existing, I miss you my Chupacabra.

Chapter 1 Introduction

In todays digitalized world, the popularity of online recreational activities has exploded- among them online gaming such as MMORPGs (Multi Million Online Role-Playing Games) boasts millions of players internationally and is an integral part of many people's lives on the internet (Grooten & Kowert, 2015). MMORPGs have also facilitated the growth of gaming culture, allowing its players to form online communities, working together in teams to achieve objectives and progress within the game. These communities can move between different social media channels as well as transcend into the physical space with meet ups and gaming tournaments (D. Williams et al., 2006).

Gaming as an industry has also seen exponential growth, with many game developers and corporations in East Asian countries such as Japan, South Korea and China competing with major western companies to expand their empires to international markets, allowing them to achieve a wider player base and government funding to further develop their games.

For these companies to expand into the global market, developers and key decision makers need to understand their audiences and how their player habits differ according to cultural differences. In this way gaming corporations have always had a close relationship with their players by utilizing feedback and testing new content. As their main source of revenue, the players are excited by new releases and content updates and happily provide insights into the games.

However, when a company creates unwanted changes and refuses to communicate with its audiences', tensions can rise and cause resistance from the players. Leading people to quit and even boycott the game until changes are made. Video game boycotts are something that have been occurring with increasing intensity in recent years and leads into discussions on how people on the internet are taking part in consumer activism more frequently.

The Activation Blizzard lawsuit is an example of one of the biggest boycott events in the gaming world, with press coverage from news media outlets and attention on many social media platforms. As a company Activation Blizzard were most well known for the game Call of Duty a first person shooter game that became very popular in the western market (Chan, 2021). However, the recent allegations of the company culture being involved in sexism and racist rhetoric's sparked a boycott of the company and all games associated with it. Players were now deleting and cancelling their subscriptions and urging others to do this same until the company reformed and addressed the issues.

Boycotting and other acts of resistance against a company are some examples of how consumer activism presents itself in the online sphere, people online are now more conscious and aware of their purchasing habits and what their money is supporting, focusing on ethical consumption.

It also shows how fans of different communities form together to collectively resist corporations and those in power, utilizing their social networks to spread information and find their own political voices on causes that matter to them.

Gaming as a platform is becoming more of an interesting space for researchers understand how individuals form identities around new media and cultures. As well as becoming spaces for consumers to participate in protesting against corporations and their capitalistic nature. Many gaming researchers in the digital space now look at the social aspect of gaming through the formation of guilds and other social spaces and how people form groups and networks according to their interests.

Therefore, in this research I examine the strategies and practices used by a gaming community to elicit a response from a company and force them into action, I frame their actions as rooted in consumer activism practices as well as examples of how the internet can allow everyday politics.
I frame this as a case study, an example of how online gaming communities are 'fans' as well as consumers and can facilitate consumer activism to occur through boycotting and resistance. The struggle between fan consumers and corporations is not traditionally seen as part of online activism practices but I argue that in digital society many online groups seek to reform dominant practices through coordinated efforts as consumers (Jenkins et al., 2016). And as many online spaces are guarded by corporations, this consumer activism becomes a central point for contemporary social movements (Cohen, 2004).

I argue that the reaction from the players and their demanding of better communication from the company can be regarded as a component of digital activism. I define digital activism through classification, as "spaces online that are used to organize, mobilize and take action, enhanced through the use of the internet" (Vegh, 2003, p. 113). Using their online communities these groups have lower barriers for participation, allowing information to be spread multi modally across different platforms on the internet as well as allowing people easier access to support causes which they believe in.

1.1 Background

For South Korea, the online game industry gained popularity globally with the MMORPG game MapleStory which not only had a national but international release experiencing millions of players during the late 2000s. The game was divided into regions or 'servers' KMS (Korean MapleStory) and GMS (Global MapleStory) Many fans of MapleStory have been playing for years, growing up as the game developed and changed, today many of its current player base are these long-term fans (Jeong, 2008). This game was inspired by cute pixel anime characters. Players would choose a "class" such as warrior, bowman, magician, and thief which they would level up and work with other players to progress within the game. This game gave its parent company and developer Nexon, its international success and propelled the popularity of MMORPG games into the Western market. Throughout the years Nexon has released many updates and changes within the game, in both the Global and Korean servers. These included adding or removing items, maps, and content.

The growing issues within the game caused increasing frustration. People were unable to log into their accounts, would be disconnected during boss fights and permanently banned without any way to

appeal. With no response from Nexon and lack of communication spanning years, players decided to boycott spending within the game until Nexon acknowledged the players concerns and feedback. Deleting characters worth thousands of dollars, cancelling their subscriptions, and even deleting the game. This boycott was initiated by users on Reddit in January 2022, posting an entire list of all the issues within the game and all the mal practices of Nexon since the game was released.

"A new year has come. and with it, a lot of disappointed players... Lots of players didn't get the Christmas box, servers are still unstable, lots of content is missing from the winter update, prices are unreal It is time for the GMS community to unite and boycott Nexon until major changes to game quality and stability take place in GMS. ALL Maplestory GMS players are requested to NOT charge NX until things Change. I Repeat, DO NOT FUND NEXON until changes start to take place in GMS! NOW IS THE TIME TO ACT!" (Reddit 2022)

These posts gained thousands of upvotes and support from players resulting in the creation of the GMS Boycott thinktank server on Discord, for players to better communicate and organise ways to protest against Nexon. Discord is a communication platform where moderators and admins send invite links to users, a public space for instant messaging. Similar boycotts were initiated in the Korean server with Nexon giving compensation to the players and increasing avenues for communication, however players in the global server were ignored and using the same boycott tactics from Korea started a boycott of their own until Nexon met their demands. The main goal being increased communication and transparency with future content and item changes as well as investigations into game crashes and lag issues. Many players felt like Nexon as a company did not value them as customers and rather treated them as revenue without taking their feedback into account.

Information around the boycott was spread easily and quickly through different social media platforms with members using their social groups to join in. The communication platforms within the game itself were also used to spread boycott messages and many users participated. Although the original call to action for the boycott was initiated on the social media platform Reddit, the Discord server was held as the main space for the active participants of the boycott to organize and strategize different tactics to gain a response from Nexon. The moderators of this server invited prominent members of the MapleStory community to support the cause and drafted collective responses to send to the stakeholders within the company.

1.2 Research Questions and Aim

As the aim of this thesis is to explore the MapleStory gaming community as a case study for consumer activism in a digital space and to look at online gaming as a new space where networked movements can form, I aim to answer the following questions in the research:

1. How did the MapleStory gaming community utilize consumer activism practices and strategies against the corporation Nexon.
2. How did the MapleStory community understand their positions as consumers and players of the game.
3. How did the MapleStory gaming community form networks to communicate and spread information

My initial idea for this research came from the community that I have been involved in for many years. Being someone who has shared the same frustrations as the players and dealt with the same issues I experienced real time how people on the internet can assume different roles and identities according to the social groups they belonged in. The members of the MapleStory community were not only players but were consumers, content creators as well as informed individuals who were using their voices to protest against a cause that affected them directly. I argue that this study contributes to an understanding of how consumer activism can be facilitated through these individuals who are not only fans but informed netizens who utilize their positions as consumers to create change in the social networks.

I discuss my analysis through the lens of digital activism and consumer activism, so it is important to define and understand my position in terms of these concepts. For digital activism I look to Vegh (2003) and their definition of digital activism which is a social movement that utilizes the internet for its activism practices. I combine this with consumer activism research on the internet which involves consumers protesting against corporations through market based political actions. I believe the activism conducted in online gaming is a mixture of both but more focused on consumer practices which is the direction I have decided to proceed in.

Chapter 2 Existing research

To understand how the MapleStory gaming community utilized consumer activism practices, in this section I provide an overview into the existing research available on this topic. When initially searching the key words 'gaming' and 'activism' I found that this is a relatively understudied area of research, however by broadening my search into fandom and consumer activism I was able to frame my case in the wider phenomenon. I start with an overview into digital activism or internet activism, how the internet and digital tools can challenge and overthrow prevailing power structures as well as how the internet has created new forms of activism practices such as memes and hacktivism.

This then moves into discussions around consumer activism and anti-branding, how social movements use consumption as a tool for activism against corporations. This prior understanding of consumer activism and digital activism will help contextualize my case through this lens and continue into the topic of research around fandom studies and how fan activists are born from resistance and enter civic discourses when they assert their collective rights over the producers of media. This gives us an understanding of how players of online games are also fans and further frames gaming as a medium for fan practices to occur. Lastly, I investigate localisation studies to further conceptualize my research problem, looking at how gaming companies adapt games to be released into the global market and showing the relationship between the players and the developers. While also looking at examples when gaming companies fail at communication and create tensions with its players.

2.1 Digital Activism

According to Smith (2016), activism is when groups of people strive for social change through collective action in response to conflicts or power struggles between institutions or individuals. Traditional political scientists and sociologists focused on early activism through collective action whereby large groups of people create social movements in physical spaces through protests, rallies, and marches to advocate for change or for fighting inequality and injustices. Technology has undoubtedly changed the way in which activism is conducted in a digital space. Historically social movement groups were the first to adopt and incorporate new technologies into their social change struggles to circulate information and raise consciousness (Glass, 2019). However, the internet differs from other communicative mediums in that it is immediate, interactive and allows the fast spreading of information across borders. It allows its users to interact without face-to-face meetings, a higher number of anonymity and increased autonomy (Lindgren, 2017).

Digital activism can take many forms, according to a study into the relationship between online and offline activism, digital media and social media facilitates online activism in three ways. Firstly, by allowing individuals to express their experiences and relating them to the cause, secondly by online communities to show solidarity and support and thirdly by sharing information with others outside of the

cause so they might in turn share with others (Greijdanus et al., 2020). Vegh (2003, p. 105) defines online activism through "a politically motivated movement relying on the internet". Although mentioning that activism can take many forms but in the online world, these movements can use both traditional and online activism practises to achieve their goals. The members of these movements rely on their social networks to spread messages and organize collective action online.

"Existing movements and action groups have successfully used the Internet as a mass communication medium to reach greater, global audiences. In parallel, there has been a tremendous growth in the number of independent news providers who mass communicate their alternative views on current event" (Postmes & Brunsting, 2002, p. 293)

The internet is a key tool for activists to use, mainly for spreading information about their causes. Allowing a wider range of communication exceeding physical borders in an inexpensive and timely manner. Traditional activism practices such as protesting, and rallying can be coordinated efficiently using the internet, and online petitions can be signed by thousands of people in a matter of hours (Tatarchevskiy, 2011). Other activist methods can include hashtag activism which mobilized the use of hashtags on social media to show solidarity with a cause. An example of this was the #BlackLivesMatter movement that sought to highlight racism against black people, which resulted from the killing of black citizens in the US by police officers (The New York Times, 2020). This movement utilized social media as a call to action to sign petitions for justice to be served to the officers. Gaining support from celebrities and social media influencers, eventually moving into the physical space with protests and rallies in the US and around the world. Eventually resulting in the trial and murder charges for some of the officers involved. Sparking reviews into the justice system in America.

Another way in which activists use the internet is through the use of memes, which usually involves humor and imagery, remixing popular culture into relatable images studied how internet memes and humor are a new alternative form of communication that can "spark instances of political participation" (Moreno-Almeida, 2021). Memes and humor thrive through sharing, spreading and mutating through a collective understanding of an inside joke (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017). Another study by Shifman et al. (2014) mentions that users that share similar life experiences can relate to one another and share images such as memes that are understood by multiple participants. Memes can not only reflect social values but also alter them in subtle ways. They can also be used to protest heavily censored governments where only the 'in group' understands its meanings.

China is one example of a government that heavily censors its citizens, those who are caught using words blocked by the governments algorithm systems or by spreading antigovernment messages can see their account permanently banned. A study by Mina (2014) shows memes are a way for Chinese activists to bypass these censors while still being able to protest. The Crazy Crab movement in China consisted of

users posting selfies in sunglasses for an anonymous Chinese comic artist. Which then was printed into t shirts and mutated into other memes which continuously evaded censorship. This shows that while the internet can serve as a liberation technology, allowing more users to participate in activism practices it can also have a dual side effect. Governments and corporations can also use the internet to increase surveillance on its citizens and suppress actions and protests that might threaten their power. As well as exploiting the data of its users to sell products and services. (Fuchs, 2014, p. 172) writes:

"Corporations and their logic dominate social media and the internet, and that the internet is predominantly capitalist on character. Corporations and capitalist logic colonize social media. Multimedia companies' celebrities and advertising dominate attention and visibility."

In this view, the internet has allowed the clicks and content of users to become a form of commodity that is sold to corporations for advertisements. While not everyone is aware of it many consumer activists focus and target corporations in responses to their unethical practices. A research study by Hollenbeck & Zinkhan (2006) into anti brand movements explains how the internet provides communication methods for people around the globe regardless of geographical location. Anti-brand movements are when consumers take on social activist's roles by voicing their opposition to corporate domination. Brand communities are networks of consumer relationships that situate around a particular brand and gives people meanings for their interactions. In reverse an anti-brand community forms its identity around aversions towards brands and corporations.

These acts of consumer activism form due to a moral obligation for the betterment of society and to hold corporations accountable if they act unethically or exploitive. An example of this can be seen in the anti-Nike sweatshop movement which protested against working conditions and pay of employees in South East Asian countries that were creating Nike products (Sage, 1999). Boycotting and Buycotting are the main techniques used by consumer activists to protest corporations, which involves refusing to buy or spend money on a corporation's products and services. Through the internet these boycotts can reach large audiences and coerce people in to collective action through shared communities (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006). Consumer activists believe that their positions as spending money on a corporation serves as a vote of support for the business. Which suggests that consumers must have some moral responsibility to research and inform themselves about companies' practices.
In the online space corporations are the institutions that control much of the media available on the internet and thus become the key decision makers to target when its consumers are unhappy.

2.2 Fandom and activism

Continuing from the notion of consumer activism I now turn to how the everyday actions within fandom and niche subcultures can also contribute to micro politics. Fan participation in their communities can lead to enhanced political agency and civic engagement empowering people to make steps towards activism efforts and collective action (Fiske, 2011). Fandom refers to a subculture of fans that come together to share common interests around a certain topic or media. The earliest research into fandom can be attributed to Jenkins et al. (2016) and Fiske (2011) in the early 90s and during the emergence of the internet. Fandom was seen as a way for communities to form and resist mainstream discourses as well as the consumption and production of media (Gray & Harrington, 2017).

For Fiske (2011), fandom is an informal set of everyday practices and personal identities that are used confront power structures, his research on how young female fans of the singer Madonna went from disempowerment to an important symbolic figure, enabled the fans to reject patriarchal feminist stereotypes. People's interactions with other fans within their own fandom can lead to shifts within ones down personal political identity (Jenkins et al., 2016, p. 154). These fans of Madonna would attempt to adopt her attitudes, clothing and looked to her sexuality to empower themselves. This would eventually lead to the emergence of third wave feminism and allow similar activist cultures to take place (Conti, 2001).

"The teenage girl fan of Madonna who fantasizes her own empowerment can translate this fantasy into behavior, and can act in a more empowered way socially, thus winning more social territory for herself. When she meets others who share her fantasies and freedom there is the beginning of a sense of solidarity, of a shared resistance, that can support and encourage progressive action on the micro-social level." (Fiske, 2011, p. 30)

Similarly in the realm of gaming, the "Girls' Games" movement sought to change the gendering of computer games and worked with industry leaders for more representation in the gaming market (Cassell & Jenkins, 2000). The study showed that many of the early games portrayed sexist gender stereotypes, men were always heroes and women were always vulnerable and needed to be saved. The "Girls Games" movement is one example where female fans of games were able to incite change within the culture of gaming, to be orientated toward women as well as men. By working with developers and companies they were able to create a space within gaming geared towards them. "Fan activism" refers to forms of civic engagement and political participation that emerge from within fan culture itself, often in response to the shared interests of fans, often conducted through the infrastructure of existing fan practices and relationships, and often framed through metaphors drawn from popular and participatory culture" (Jenkins et al., 2016, p. 22).

In this way fandom and consumer activism are closely linked as fan identities is one that was born

out of resistance and a gap in the original media. Leading fans to remix content and enter civic discourse when they assert their collective rights as the most engaged members of a media audience (Jenkins et al., 2016). These movements might not be directly related to traditional political activism practices as they do not aim to change governmental policies however, they are classed as micro politics that shape institutions and corporate practices and allow social groups without power a platform and a voice to transform dominant practices through coordinated efforts as consumers (Cohen, 2004). In the digital world the way in which people express their political concerns are taking place through languages and contexts shaped by commercial culture, in this way fan activism and consumer activism are central to contemporary social movements online. Pop culture references are impacting political rhetoric and are elements of consumer activism are features of our everyday lives

2.3 Online Gaming research

Continuing from fandom and fan culture I now move into the existing discourses and research around online gaming. Much of the research done into gaming studies looks at the world of online games through individuals and identity forming and how public perceptions of online gaming has changed as it became a widely accepted pastime. These perspectives look at online gaming through a generalized lens and exclude how it has become a new type of communication platform.

Grooten and Kowert (2015, p. 1) write:

"With the advent of digital games came the advent of gamer cultures and identities. A "gamer" became a new social category for the group of individuals who played video games (primarily in arcades) in the late 1970's. As part of a socio-cultural niche, "gamer" was established to define and unite this group of people. However, with the popularization and growth of games themselves, the term "gamer" has also grown and changed. Today, this term not only represents players but differentiates "gamers" as their own subcultural movement."

With the interconnectivity of MMORPGs and other online games, many researchers within gaming studies argue that games are one such medium that seem to transcend national and international borders and are deeply embedded in cultural contexts (Sullivan et al., 2006).

"Video games can act as a vehicle for images, values and themes that reflect the cultural environment in which they are created and may act on the ways of thinking and the cultural references of users, especially among young people" (O'Hagan, 2013, p. 203)

Many popular MMORPGs have international playerbases and facilitate intercultural exchanges between players and gaming content (Siitonen, 2007). The differences in gaming cultures and identities from the

originating country and to the global audience is an important factor how games are adapted to different localities as well as what entails when adapting a game for global release. This frames an understanding of how players understand cultural differences and transcend national boundaries to participate in activism.

Many online games are developed in East Asian countries such as Japan, Korea and China and have international releases across the globe. This means that some gaming happens within certain national boundaries, for example servers defined by European regions as well as different language versions of the game, while others happen internationally. For a game to have a successful rendition that can be played by different nationalities, developers and gaming corporations must understand the cultural differences and localize the contents of the game to be understood universally. Game localisation is a term used within translation studies and refers to the processes involved in adapting games and software to be suitable for sale in another country this includes linguistic and cultural adaptations as well as user experiences (O'Hagan, 2013, p. 19). Localization involves decision making from developers, key stakeholders of a company, translators, and the players of the game itself. Many times, gaming companies utilize upon player feedback and data into adapting a game for international audiences

The translators themselves require some knowledge of the game's lore and familiarity with concepts which means their role and agency directly impact the games development (Milton & Bandia, 2009). The success of a company relies on its positive relationship with its player base, by asking for and utilizing player feedback gaming companies can retain more players and maintain trust which leads to more revenue generated for the game. This symbiotic relationship is a unique factor that differentiates gaming from other mediums. Many gaming companies also allow fans to create media and content relating to the game and sell it as merchandise generating more publicity and revenue for the company. One-way companies utilize player feedback is by inviting players to beta test new content, players can experience exclusively new updates within the game while providing detailed knowledge on how certain aspects of the game can be improved. For the company they gain useful user insights and information (O'Hagan, 2013).

This means that those companies that have a closer relationship with their players can use them in beta testing and improving the game while working closely with the translators. The problem arises when companies decide to outsource translation jobs to those who have little experience with the game, and this creates a gap in the players expectations and eventually a bad game release (O'Hagan, 2013).
A study by Kent (2004) found that Western players tend to prefer games involving action and fast paced games with quick gratification such as levelling and increased interactivity, whereas Korean players prefer more story driven games with deep lore and fantasy elements. Many Korean players also preferred games that were slower and had more of a time sink into them levelling and getting gratification at a much lower rate preferring to grind more than western counterparts. In the west people wanted to be able to level up and progress within a game quicker, not having the patience to grind out for long hours (Jin,

2010).

When the companies and decision makers are unable to understand different players and different cultural contexts, tensions can arise between the fans (players) of the game and the corporations. One of the ways that these tensions manifest themselves in the world of gaming is the relationship between the developers of the game and of the consumers i.e., the players (Gee & Hayes, 2011). This is done by creating customer loyalty. By rewarding players that repeatedly spend on the game, companies retain a higher level of users that will continue to willingly support the games development. Not only because they receive items that help them progress but because they want to see development of new content and areas (Huang et al., 2022). As mentioned previously the relationship between gamers and games is closer than other industries as in some cases companies rely on user feedback in how to improve the game. The activities of the gamers can also directly correlate to a game's success upon release and generate marketing and advertisement for the company. With gamers creating fan art and other media they are no longer only consumers of the game but more direct participants in its creation.

Many of the famous and well-known MMORPGs are developed and released by companies in Japan, Korea and China which means the developers of these games must understand the cultural and social differences when adapting a game to the global market (O'Hagan, 2013).
In some way we can say that video games have become its own cultural medium, with some games becoming an integral part of global popular culture, for a company to develop and release a game globally the developers and translators must also be aware of differences between players in Asia and the West. The choices in localisation mentioned above are not only determined by cultural factors but also the decisions made by marketing companies and powerful members of gaming corporations.

"That game localization and internationalization strategies are closely tied to marketing initiatives and therefore they often reveal more about distributors' motives or preconceptions than the tastes of international game audiences" (O'Hagan, 2013, p. 204)

In the global market Korean and Chinese game developers compete with major western companies in the release of new MMORPGs. This is also because the social aspect of online gaming is more prominent in these countries, the increased public spaces of gaming cafes and arcade centers makes online gaming a channel of fostering new relationships (Lee & Chen, 2010). Furthermore, the gamer identity mentioned previously has also become somewhat of a status symbol with some players becoming famous and rich over their skill in particular online games. In the same way due to its success these gaming companies and governments channel more funding into gaming research and growth.

"Online gaming cannot be understood without paying attention to the late capitalist economic systems from which it emerged and the changing political, social and cultural contexts in which its commodities

are produced and consumed." (Kerr, 2011, p. 4)

The global industry of gaming is not just limited to online transactions between consumer and producer but rather consists of a multitude of socio-economic structures such as globalization and commercialization as well as company related decisions in marketing, finance research and stakeholder participation (McAllister, 2005).

This also means that in some way the fans of these games have become a commodity through their participation in the game and spending money on subscriptions and items. As Lindgren (2017, p. 207) mentions "The clicks and the content of users become a form of data commodity- a set of information about what users say and do online - which can be sold by social media companies to advertising clients, who can target their ads to the desired users accordingly". This is not always seen by the user, who sees the activity as fun and rewarding. The same can be said for the relationship between the game developers and the players, as their relationship is more collaborative than other industries. The knowledge and player data can be used by corporations to improve and make changes to the game to generate more revenue.

In this way, the gap in the literature is this: there is very little work done on how gamers hold gaming companies accountable by engaging with them through consumer activists' practices. As their relationships as fans differs from other media and is more closely connected. As well as how I frame my case study as an example of how consumers utilize digital media to challenge these companies and how this impacts the relationship between players and gaming corporations.

Chapter 3 Theory

I frame this as a case study, an example of how online gaming communities are 'fans' as well as consumers and can facilitate consumer activism to occur through boycotting and resistance. The struggle between fan consumers and corporations is not traditionally seen as part of online activism practices by political researchers but I argue that in digital society many online groups seek to reform dominant practices through coordinated efforts as consumers. and as many online spaces are guarded by corporations, this consumer activism becomes a central point for contemporary social movements (Cohen, 2004).

I argue that the reaction from the players and their demanding of better communication from the company can be regarded as a component of digital activism. I define digital activism through Vegh (2003, p. 113) classification, as "spaces online that are used to organize, mobilize and take action, enhanced through the use of the internet" Using their online communities these groups have lower barriers for participation, allowing information to be spread multi modally across different platforms on the internet as well as allowing people easier access to support causes they believe in.

In this chapter, I explain my theoretical framework and conceptualize my categories for my analysis. Motivating why I have chosen this structure and its relevancy within society. The main concepts I made use of in my theoretical framework are networked social movements and consumer activism. This is because of the position of my thesis within digital activism studies as an example of how gaming communities utilize consumer activism to reform issues that are important to them. The secondary themes that also fit into this are participatory culture/ the civic imagination as well as everyday politics. I argue that participation is a key component for networked social movements and these groups learn and inform one another around enhanced political skills and practices.

2.1 Connected networks & consumers

It is also important to understand how these instances of consumer activism form through connected networks on the internet. For Castells (2013) an individual who proactively participates in shaping social change there needs to be resistance and power struggles against dominant structures in society, in an online setting these are mostly corporations and private institutions.

Networked social movements is one way to explain how people online become activists. They utilize the internet and mobile communication networks but all multi modally, at the same time. Communication messages move between different social platforms as well as resulting in the creation of new groups and spaces on these platforms specifically about that movement. These groups have a few notable characteristics, firstly they lack formal leadership in that every member of the group has maximum chance to participate in the movement as well as being open ended allowing people to leave and join as they please. This is not to say they are completely devoid of hierarchy; the leaders of the group are usually prominent members of the existing network or someone who has

experience in leading. Secondly, they are usually spontaneous in their origin, triggered by an event that is big enough to affect the whole community. Which then leads to a call to action to the rest of the group resulting in the messages being emotionally charged, each member becoming a transmitter and receiver of information (Castells, 2013). These movements are also local and global at the same time, starting in specific contexts building and widening their networks and because of the nature of the internet can spread across the world in their mobilization.

"They keep an ongoing, global debate on the Internet, and sometimes they call for joint, global demonstrations in a network of local spaces in simultaneous time. They express an acute consciousness of the intertwining of issues and problems for humanity at large, and they clearly display a cosmopolitan culture, while being rooted in their specific identity." (Castells, 2013, p. 251)

This enables them to have togetherness while still maintaining their own motivations and goals, the connected action enables people to feel solidarity with the movement. People's emotions and feelings can affect an individual's actions and the way they interpret things as well as their political actions. In an online setting, emotions have been an integral part of how people function and how social exchanges give rise to emotions of varying intensity (Lindgren, 2017). 'Affect' is a force that attaches people to certain communities and networks. Emotions of happiness, anger, frustration can affect users to react and respond in a certain way. It is something that is an experience of intensity and oftentimes is an unconscious process but leads to visible emotions being conveyed. These emotions are often the biggest reasons of why people participate online and why they connect with others through networked of similar interests (Papacharissi, 2015).

The main way networked social movements are engaged in power struggles online is through contestations between corporations and governments. Corporations are on a global scale and many aspects of the state and governments which would ordinarily enforce the power structures, found itself limited in its control over the internet and its users. To counteract this, these governments found ways to excerpt control over its users through increased surveillance and data collection.

"Corporations have a love-hate relationship with it (the internet) and are trying to extract profits while limiting its potential for freedom." (Castells, 2013, p. 276)

Using data commodity, the information users generate online from doing everyday activities can be sold to corporations that can use this information to sell products and services to the desired users. With any activity done on the internet companies and capitalistic logics dominate digital society (Lindgren, 2017). Continuing from this notion, while corporations are the main institutions in power in the online sphere, this makes the people online consumers as well as users. For these networked social movements to have an impact in their activism practices they must utilize their positions as consumers and participate in consumer activism to have their voices be heard (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004).
Lightfoot (2019, p. 142) defines consumer activism through:

"Activism taken by consumers through participating in the market. This can involve activities such as choosing to

shop for only fair-trade products or boycotting a company because of its labor practices."

Consumer activism as a practice did not just start on the internet but has a long history of people protesting the mal practices of corporations. This has been done through boycotting products, offering alternatives and promoting different notions of fair and honest trade (Lightfoot, 2019). As consumerism and consumption has become a central role in contemporary society, consumer movements have arisen more and more to challenge and transform corporations and their practices. These movements are organized around goals that resist marketing and industrial practices. According to Kozinets & Handelman (2004) there are three factors for consumer activism to take place, Goals, self-representation and adversaries. The goal would be to change the way in which the corporations produce goods and services framing their purchases as a moral choice. To give money to a corporation means that you agree with their practices even if they are unethical. Consumer activism is often kickstarted by an event that highlights the mal practices of a company or by recognition that a company is engaging in harmful practices that will affect their communities.

Boycotting is a popular method for consumer activists especially during the rise of the internet, making it easier for people to initiate the boycotts as well as its low barrier for participation, people can become consumer activists by deciding where to spend their money. Consumer boycotts can damage a brands reputation and its relationship with its customers depending on their crisis communication. One interesting aspect of these online boycotts is that although they retain some traditional structure of boycotts such as not spending and occupying media space, they also do not always have traditional leaders organizing the efforts. The effectiveness of boycotts has been an interesting point of research for political researchers, with almost all boycotts receiving some form of result from the company being targeted. Not necessarily a result that was the original goal of the boycott but other actions such as marketing campaigns to save the company's image (Lightfoot, 2019).

For a boycott to be successful they need to have some key components, firstly they need to reward the company for making changes in response to the boycott whether it be promising to continue spending or stopping the boycott efforts. Secondly the boycott needs a clear message of the goal and the actions that need to be taken to achieve that goal and the specific changes the company needs to take. Thirdly the boycott needs sustained attention effectively using social media and celebrities to maintain focus on the boycott efforts.

Anti-brand communities are one example of networks of consumer relationships that specifically oppose certain brands or corporations and voice their opinion on opposing capitalistic structures. Traditionally the relationship between the consumer and the producer is seen as a mutually exclusive relationship, the brand provides the consumers with identities that server their needs while advertising the product to other people. Many consumers in the online world see corporations as dominating and oppressive by using deceitful marketing tactics and challenge corporate behavior by attaching negative meanings to the company's brand. Consumer activism ideologically focuses on the betterment of the world through all can benefit from it. however, in the era of globalization and not everyone having access to the same benefits consumer society has shifted to serve only those who can afford it. In an online setting this consumer activism focuses on the conscious decisions of consumers through buying or not buying their products forming social groups around this notion rather than looking at the long-term effects consumer activism can have on companies.

In this way consumer activism can be a powerful tool for those who normally do not have a voice and is a low-risk

tactic for individuals who are getting involved in activism for the first time. As well as allowing people to join over long distances and show solidarity.

However, there are also critiques to consumer activism and networked social movements. For consumer activism the main critique being that it does not focus on the causes of inequality such as the power structures that give corporations the ability to exploit and use unethical practices rather it uses this position and plays into it. There is also the issue of consumer activism being ineffective as a tactic in the long term as it can be difficult to keep people engaged for long periods of time, while having low barriers to participation this can also mean that people can move onto other causes quickly and forget that their consumption has moral implications.

For networked social movements, the idea that users of the internet are passively unaware of their exploitation by companies is inherently one sided. The internet has proven to allow for an enhanced awareness and political identity whereby users inform each other of issues that directly affect them and make conscious decisions to interact with certain aspects of the internet according to their knowledge (Lindgren, 2017).

2.2 Participatory culture and everyday politics

Participatory culture encompasses artistic expression and civic engagement, people are encouraged to create, share, and discuss how to improve their skills. From this people form social connections and believe their contributions matter to the broader community and have a sense of belonging. Jenkins, (1992) defines participatory culture as:

"one which embraces the values of diversity and democracy through every aspect of our interactions with each other - one which assumes that we are capable of making decisions, collectively and individually, and that we should have the capacity to express ourselves through a broad range of different forms and practices."

For Jenkins (1992) participation is always somehow connected to contestation and struggles as well as involvement with power structures. Participation itself reflects the power structures that are already existent in the world and reaffirms hierarchies which will be discussed down below.

The nature of traditional political participation is transforming in the online space, youths and users of the internet prefer to engage in political participation that is loose and less hierarchical through their communities and networks. Cammaerts (2015) argues that while users on the internet can involve themselves in online activism, this type of activism is not as meaningful as its offline counterparts. This means they do not foster social change on a wider level and are not political enough, by not focusing on traditional politics and institutions.

However, while not all forms of participation can be political, the internet has created a new approach to political participation with its ability to content create and immediate social interaction and information exchange. In this way people are more easily drawn to political engagement as it is more accessible. In social media channels the circulation of news not only comes from the official news sources

but also from other smaller pages, from communication networks and from the users themselves creating citizen journalism. These network mediated news are also seen as more credible as they come from trustworthy sources. People are more likely to trust in information from someone in their own network than from a traditional institution.

Jenkins (1992) observed through fandom that fans were creating and remixing media according to what they felt was missing in the original content and as a way of cultural resistance and frustration. Resistance in this case can refer to how people create and interact with symbolic gestures that question and challenge the values of the status quo. Subcultures form their identities in retaliation and opposite to the dominant cultures present. In digital culture this oppositional view is harder to distinguish as there is no longer a unified mainstream culture to oppose, rather people have created their own niche digital communities which allow more people to participate and become experts.

When looking at participatory culture, we not only focus on how individuals interact with each other but also how individuals come together to form groups or 'communities.' These online communities can foster close relationships and feelings of belonging through a shared interest. What differentiates communities to social networks is that communities tend to be more closed off with members knowing individuals as well as being knowledgeable around a specific topic (Rheingold, 1993). Another important aspect of the community is mentioned though Etzioni (1996, p. 87):

"First it is a web of affect-laden relationships that encompasses a group of individuals-relationships that crisscross and reinforce one another, rather than simply a chain of one-on-one relationships. Second, a community requires a measure of commitment to a set of shared values, more, meanings, and a shared historical identity- in short, a culture"

This focuses participation as a social interaction between individuals, allowing people to create shared meanings and practises which result in belonging to a particular social group. This definition is based on Williams (1989) approach to culture understanding it as the sum of all human experiences in everyday ordinary practices. This means that creative expression, remixing media and creating something new are in all aspects of everyday lives both in the offline and online world which leads to creating solidarity with likeminded people.

The civic imagination as a concept explains how these participatory communities start to engage in political practises through imagining that they can make some form of change possible. In an online setting this change can take place through popular culture and finding solidarity with likeminded individuals (Fiske, 2011). This emphasis on the personal actions of individuals focuses on "micro politics" which involves everyday acts of resistance in small ways. Fandom and niche subcultures used this method as well as remixing media and well-known symbols. These gestures were not overly radical but rather challenged the status quo in subtle ways. Memes are one example of how these groups can

participate in activism using humour and are an important step in mobilizing people into action. Identifying the villain and the victim to gain compassion and support from other people.

So while Castells (2013, p. 144) mentioned that these networked social movements become spaces of autonomy by occupying public spaces in the real world. This mixing of the urban and online spaces allows these movements "to be exercised as a transformative force by challenging the disciplinary institutional order by reclaiming the space of the city for its citizens."

Using consumer activism explanations, I understand that in some cases these networked social movements use their positions as consumers to protest against corporations. Not only having to move to a physical space but their activism tactics can be mostly conducted online and provide results.

I propose my theoretical framework below, in this model the central theory is around networked social movements and how they form while combining this with consumer activism online, looking at the coordinated positions of consumers as well as the social networks of people online. I argue that a combination of both is central to understanding my case study and looking at online gaming through this context. The smaller themes are around participatory culture and everyday politics which are not the central parts of the framework but help a deeper understanding of the research topic. I combine Castells, (2013) understandings of social movements as well as Hollenbeck & Zinkhan (2006) research into anti brand movements and resistance of capitalism.
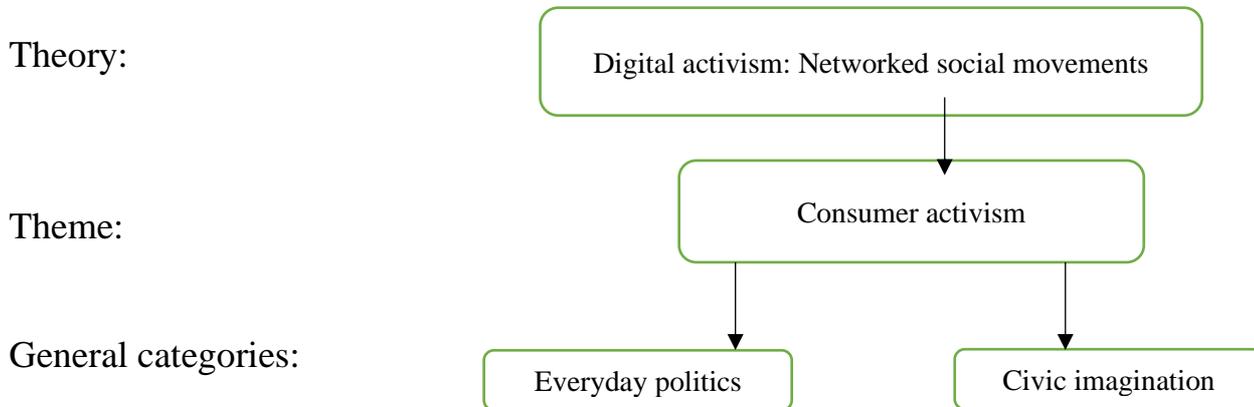
Theory:

Theme:

General categories:

Figure 1 Theoretical framework model

Chapter 4 Methodology

In order to answer the research questions through the theoretical framework I have outlined above I employed a qualitative mixed methods approach.

According to Fossey et al (2002), qualitative research attempts to understand the meanings and experiences of peoples lives and social worlds. As well as explain a research phenomenon through societal and cultural contexts. I focus my understanding through a phenomenological lens, looking at how individuals experience the world and how this relates to wider discourses and theories.

This particular research is framed as a case study, I believe this is important to mention as it is an example of the phenomenon, I am researching but not one that can be replicated. Case studies entail

"empirical investigations of a contemporary phenomenon within its natural context using multiple sources of evidence." (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006, p. 15)

Although a case study may not be reliable in its replication it still addresses a particular phenomenon and uses examples to explain it. Grounded in rich descriptions and information it allows the researcher to identify themes and categories of behaviour and events and frame them through the theoretical lens. Explanatory case studies aim to analyse specific issues within the boundaries of a certain phenomenon, answering 'how' or 'why' questions. The researcher has little control over the occurrence of events but rather is a story teller in their approach to the data (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006).

In this way my case of the MapleStory player boycott is a case study into how online gaming facilitates consumer activism practises to take place as well as looking into how this group organized their practises as a networked social movement, to do this I used two methods in an attempt to encapsulate the data, for the data gathering phase and access into the site of analysis I used digital ethnography. A research method that primarily focuses on observations and shadowing individuals in a space where face to face interactions can be interpreted. Although my field site was on the internet where there is limited opportunity for face-to-face interactions, I still utilized the shadowing technique and gaining access to the data as well as organizing it.

The second method I used was content analysis, taking the data gathered and examining it for recurring themes and categories. As my data was mostly textual, I found it easier to categorize this data and examine it during my research period. I will now briefly explain the two methods and then explain how the data was organized and collected.

4.1 Digital Ethnography

Ethnography is a broad term for research using a variety of techniques to collect data such as interviews and participant observation. It can be defined as:

"the study of people in naturally occurring settings or 'fields' by means of methods which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities, involving the researcher participating directly in the setting, if not also the activities, in order to collect data in a systematic manner but without meaning being imposed on them externally." (Brewer, 2004, p. 10)

As ethnography moves into the digital space the methods in which we capture the observations and details from the field drastically change as well as the researchers approach to conducting the fieldwork (Murthy, 2008). Without face-to-face interactions it may be difficult to capture human details such as body language, emotions, and connections, we can also argue that the anonymous nature of the internet allows researchers to gain a methodological advantage, as Hallett & Fine (2014) write:

"Being a stranger can promote self-discovery, providing clues to the social world being examined and its relation to the one from which one hails. Such inferences depend on researchers simultaneously being ethnographic strangers and disciplinary authorities, translators of group processes for academic publics."

Ethnography not only helps researchers make sense of the meanings and experiences of a certain social group but also allows the researcher themselves to be reflexive in their approach and reflect on their role in the meaning making process (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019).
In this study all observations and data collection were done in a digital setting, this included the field sites, the access needed for the group and my notes and discussions.

Shadowing is a technique in participant observation which allows the researcher to include their position as someone on the outside looking in but also preserves the researchers' feelings and emotions when conducting research (Czarniawska-Joerges, 2007). This approach is leans towards a phenomenological approach focusing on meanings created through social interactions and interpretations. Through regular interaction individuals are able to "produce common symbols by approving, arranging, and redefining them." (Blumer, 1969, p.56)

Shadowing allows the researcher to remain fluid in their observations as well as revealing the day-to-day meanings and interactions the participants are having through "blending in" with the environment to not attract attention as well as constant note taking as the research process continues. The process can become tiring over a longer period of time both on the researcher and the participant being shadowed. Throughout this whole research process, I was always considering my own position as an observer

within the field as well as understanding my own experiences are part of the research process, my method in shadowing was not only observing the participants of the Discord server but also the server as a whole, minimizing the field site to two separate channels allowed me to gain a focused picture of the phenomenon (Breuer, 2003).

In this sense conducting ethnography is a meaning making process with the participants and the researchers, it is the researchers' role to construct an account of their observations while being aware that they are making inferences on details and emotions to include or exclude in their report (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019).

This was something I considered in my approach as discussions would at some points diverge into different topics and discussions which weren't relevant to my research question. I decided to omit these conversations in my data gathering but made a note of the absences. According to Wästerfors, (2018) There are three components a researcher must aim to capture when conducting ethnographic research, details, sequences, and atmosphere. Each of which when combined provide a vivid account of the phenomena that is being portrayed. The need for details allows the researcher to pick out what specific moments or observations stood out in their field notes as well as explain why it did and what meaning did it have in the research. Details allow researchers to gain deeper contexts on what is being observed and to relate it to sociological theory later.

As my study is about how the MapleStory gaming community utilized consumer activism practices and how they formed groups to communicate and spread information about this, I believed digital ethnography would help me gain an in depth understanding on how this occurs and use digital ethnography to 'collect the data needed' (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019).

4.2 Qualitative Content Analysis

Qualitative content analysis is a method used to analyze communication messages in a way that helps us describe and quantify a certain phenomenon (Krippendorff, 2017). Allowing researchers to gain an in depth understanding of the data through repeated analysis.

It uses the data gathered so researchers can make inferences and representations according to different contexts and help understand the phenomenon according to the theory chosen. This usually involves categorizing data according to themes that may emerge during the research phase or by using preexisting themes. The aim is to attain a broad description of the phenomenon being researched and conceptualize according to categories and groups. For the content analysis I structured my method around Elo & Kyngäs (2008) three phase approach preparation, organization, and reporting. With a focus on inductive analysis which involves letting the data produce codes and themes naturally though thorough examination.

In the preparation phase, the researcher must decide on the unit of analysis, deciding what details to look for, which site to conduct the analysis and which details may be omitted or included.

The aim is to become immersed in the data and completely familiarize with the topic to relate back to the theoretical framework (Polit & Beck, 2021).

The researcher must also decide whether to analyse only the manifest or the latent content, which involves including nonverbal cues such as posture, silence, body language etc. For the purposes of this thesis, I focused on the manifest content as my field site was in the digital space and with participants who were anonymous with no face-to-face interactions. While using ethnography to collect the material and gain access to the field I used content analysis to categorize, analyse and sort the data into themes that manifested themselves.

4.3 Data Collection

As mentioned above, ethnography was used for data collection and content analysis was used for thematically sorting and coding the data. My site of research and analysis was the Discord server "GMT Boycott Think Tank." Discord is a communication platform where a sever can be either public or private and can have different subcategories called 'channels' relating to the main topic. The server I chose was focused on discussing ways to gain responses from the company Nexon and within that had many sub channels such as #strategy and #main points discussion. As the data is mostly textual, I was easily able to record conversations in an Excel spreadsheet which enabled me to go back to the data and search at any time instead of scrolling through the server. I was also able to colour code the data and add notes into different columns which was also done in Excel.

— 28/02/2022 Teachers / railway workes / factory line workers don't go on strike because of one thing....It is a multitude of things, and they list out ALL of their demands up front And they don't stop the strike untill all or a fair ammount of demands are met	Suggestions		comparing strategies of other boycotts to learn from them and apply to their case
— 28/02/2022 What we saw in the first week of this Discord is that every person that joined had their own pet peeve they wanted on the list of primary or at least secondary issues. It was becoming unmanageable and certainly impractical. If we can get Nexon to set up a board like KMS has, and then fix things patch by patch like KMS does, then we can go back to our lives. The KMS players don't need to keep boycotting, Nexon keeps giving them QoL changes because they know that if they go back to their old stonewalling ways, people will "0 won" again.	Suggestions		in reference to Korean Maplestory server that stopped spending until nexon changed the game
— 28/02/2022 also, we are players of an MMO trying to unionize against a huge megacorporation with a terrible track record and no care for us. we have to have realistic but firm expectations.	Suggestions		
— 28/02/2022 Yes and no. Coming from someone in a Union in Public Education, that's not necessarily the case. We've already laid out the foundation on what our Boycott wants to address (Communication, Spawn Enhancers, Legacy Items, etc). We've laid out the table on what we need addressed. When it comes to the actual negotiation phase, you have to focus on the biggest topics first, and then work your way down the list. If you try to give them a list of everything and try to have them resolved all at once, you're going to run into a huge mess.	Suggestions		using their real life knowledge and education to apply and create strategies fits into castells communication power theory
— 28/01/2022 At the moment I am mad at 3 sides. Nexon for being a shit, shadey, useless company and slowly killing a great game....The boycott for pre-maturely backing down on a number of topics...and myself for getting my hopes up	Suggestions		emotions and personal involvement
— 28/01/2022 Dude for fucks sake, no one is backing down from the other topics, we just need to get the biggest ones established first before we move on to the secondary concerns. Its not like anyone went back and deleted the previous posts topics for discussion, they're still there in the open.	Suggestions		many people were agreeing to this

Figure 2 Excel spreadsheet data collection

4.4 Coding procedure

As mentioned before in the inductive approach the material is examined repeatedly to gain an in depth understanding of the meanings and for the themes and codes to represent themselves within the text (Cavanagh 1997). After compiling this research, I used open coding and grouping to place the data in accordance with themes that presented itself. I chose to omit images, videos and certain discussions that veered away from the main topic while mentioning the change in my notes. The benefit of this approach was that I was able to go back and reflect on my fieldwork and add more details as I gained a deeper understanding of the topic.

The table below shows an example of the coding scheme and what codes were recurring in the data. To do this, I gathered my research into one space over the research period and added general notes and themes in separate areas as I went along and then colour coding according to which themes that were recurring. After finishing I went over the material several times and reread conversations organizing them according to certain topics that were recurring in the data. In order to maintain anonymity of users I omitted their usernames and changed their title to user and moderator to differentiate between hierarchies and social structures.

Codes	Examples
Consumer Strategies	Whenever there was mention or discussion of different activism tactics: Boycotting, protesting, appealing to stakeholders through email, spreading information
Emotions	Personal connections to the game, motivations to participate, expressions of frustration, anger.
Activism tools	Different platforms and tools utilized ex. collectively writing a letter to the CEO of the company, posting messages on other social platforms, getting famous members within the community to spread messages.
Social relationships	Conflicts within the group, social dynamics with leaders, group participation

Figure 3 example of codes and meanings

4.5 Data selection

For this specific study I have participated and been a part of a MapleStory Guild for the past 6 months and have had access to Discord Servers and Reddit communities. With this community being fluid in their communication, spanning across multiple social media channels I focused my research site onto the *GMS Boycott Think Tank* discord server- my reasoning for this was that this server was more specifically focused on the boycott of MapleStory and centred around strategies and discussions on how

to participate in activism. This server was a public space the only requirements were to have a verified Discord account.

I conducted my data gathering from the beginning of January to the end of March 2022, adding all my data to an Excel spreadsheet where I was able to categorize, label and add field notes in separate columns. Highlighting points of interest and breaks within the text where I had omitted pictures or if there were periods of silence. I focused my ethnography on the #general and #strategy channels within the server as this allowed me to gain a focused understanding on how activism was taking place and why as well as the social relationships of different users. However, I also looked to the #rules and the #personal MapleStory channel to aid my analysis around certain codes and topics.

4.6 Ethical issues

Naturally when doing research that involves human interactions in a phenomenological approach, especially on the digital platform, ethical concerns always arise. The ethical concerns of doing research in a digital space are still being mapped out and identified. Digital research requires constant reflection from the researcher about what data is being captured and how data relating to humans should be treated. The Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) mention that the ethical concerns of digital research are heavily context based and the researcher must consider notions of privacy, consent, trust, and authenticity (Lindgren 2017).

In this way my research was fully reflective of these concerns, maintaining anonymity of the users I was studying was one of my main priorities as well as understanding the implications of having a digital research site. I deduced that as my research field site was the public Discord server and based on public conversations, the users involved within the discussions were aware that their responses would be viewed by everyone else and that anyone with a Discord account could join the server and could access the information. As such I deduced that informed consent was not required as I was gathering data in a public domain.

One concern I was aware of was having any personal identifiers in my data, which included usernames, pictures, or any other information, as such I removed all usernames including aliases and nick names, only referring to people as "user" or "moderator." While I did not overtly participate in the server, I like many others were able to join and observe the discussions taking place (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004).

4.7 Limitations

I was always reflective and critical of how my role as the researcher would impact the data, as researchers themselves are storytellers, guiding the study while reflecting on their role and impact on the results. This can be a limitation of qualitative research as the data is interpreted through my

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understandings and lens, although I had an interesting position as someone who has been involved in the MapleStory community for many years but also as someone who understood the meanings social contexts of the data being analysed. I used this position to my advantage, trying to look for the deeper meanings and motivations behind the group and their actions. However, taking all the ethical issues into consideration and accepting that my biases as a researcher will always play a part in the data was a hard task.

Furthermore, as mentioned this thesis is based on a case study, while it allows for a in depth understanding of the phenomenon it also cannot be replicated or provide insights into causality. It is important to consider the advantages and the disadvantages, a smaller sample size means that larger conclusions cannot be drawn from the data alone. In addition, the bias and understandings of the researcher heavily influence the results leaving an issue of objectivity. However, I argue using Siggelkow (2007) that a smaller sample size doesn't have to be a negative aspect and that case studies still provide in depth insights into a specific phenomenon.

The timeframe for the research to be conducted can also be seen as a limitation, as I was studying a phenomenon that was occurring in real time, the data would change constantly and due to the time frame of the thesis I decided to conclude my data collecting process after two months. Given more time a further in-depth analysis could have been achieved.

Furthermore, when conducting qualitative research especially in digital ethnography the researcher is unable to ask for clarification of the data and is left to interpret according to their existing knowledge. I used this to my advantage as someone who was already familiar with the research topic and understood the contexts and nuances although this can also be a disadvantage of being too close to the data (Kozinets & Handleman 2004).

Chapter 5 Analysis

As mentioned in the introduction chapter, the main motivations for the creation of the GMS Boycott think tank Discord server were to become the central location to discuss and coordinate strategies and tactics related to boycotting Nexon as a company. Although the initial call to action started on Reddit which was a more general space for users to discuss different topics around MapleStory as a game in general. The Discord server was created for individuals who wanted to organize and participate in the boycott against Nexon. In the welcome section of the server a moderator outlines the reasons the boycott was initiated and how members can take part.

*"It is granted that you must **SPEND NO MONEY AT ALL**. As long as this protest is going, and each time it will be needed again*
Stay informed. *If you are interested in the state of the game and want better, it is crucial that you stay on top of the Maple news cycle.*
Be vocal. *Alert your community of things they may have missed and join the complaints when you can."*

With this in mind the analysis section firstly looks at the networked aspect of the discord server, how the members utilized their communication networks and relationships to organize and spread information about the boycott and the mal practices of the company over the years. I found that naturally members of the group with more experience took on leadership roles to inform newer members of the group about why they were boycotting and why it was important. I focus on how the members of this server displayed the early characteristics of a networked social movement and how individuals were able to develop their own political voices through their interactions with the group.

This then moves into discussions around consumerism, how the members understood and utilized their positions as consumers and players of the game to force a reaction from Nexon. I connect the theory on consumer activism, looking at that strategies and tools were used against the company and how a dialog was created through their protesting efforts.

Lastly, I look at the players responses to Nexon when the company released statements addressing player concerns, highlighting if the members of the boycott felt like their goals had been met and the future goals of the consumer activism strategies. As well understanding the relationships between the developers of the game and the players.

5.1 Connected networks

Through my analysis I found that members of the Discord server showed some key characteristics of an early formation of a networked social movement. Firstly, they did this by motivating why they were boycotting, their emotions towards the game and their positions within the wider gaming community. This was presented through two codes, "Social relationships" and "Emotions" I highlight the main findings below.

Many of the members of the sever were long term players of MapleStory and had a personal connection with the game. Forming their first social relationships online through playing together and finding their first group mates and friends. Many players would stay loyal to one group and create shared experiences which led to its loyal fanbase. This loyalty and personal connection were one of the key motivators to create a call to action against the company and demand better changes for the game as well as connecting to other members in the server who were boycotting for the same reasons. Creating a collective identity and connection to the consumer activism.

Moderator: "As for me, I first played this game back when it first came out like most of you. I quit around 2008-2010 (can't remember exactly) and came back to the game around the summer of 2020. and have generally had a blast. I have whaled my fair share to be honest with you This game has grown into something amazing the past decade I've been gone, but it can be so much more. Looking at other game communities and the communication they get (even KMS nowadays) from their developers has me believing perhaps we ourselves can make some kind of change in this game for the better. Perhaps I'm naive and foolish for even trying all this, but at least I can say I tried."

A moderator in the server posts about their personal journey with MapleStory and what the cause means to them, comparing the MapleStory player community with other gaming communities and wanting to make a difference. This then led to a dedicated channel being created for other members to also share their personal journeys with the game and what changes they wanted to see.

Moderator: "Please share if you'd like what the boycott means to you and why you decided to support it in the first place~ This channel will be on slow-mode as I'd like it to be less about discussion and more about yall's own Maplestory experiences/story."

As (Castells, 2013) mentions a key aspect of a networked social movement is an initial call to action around a cause and rallying the group in emotionally charged instances. The call to action although not originating in the Discord server created a snowball effect with many long-term members using their emotions to rally against the company. Emotions have long been an integral part of protests and

activism, and this is amplified through the digital world with people connecting themselves to content. The members of the MapleStory community felt strongly towards the game because of the memories it held, which made them want to protect it from being changed in a way that would ruin their experience. This led to emotions of frustration, anger, and unhappiness.

User: "To me, this boycott is important because if Nexon of truly valued us, even if it is a small fraction of their overall revenue, they would take the time to communicate with the GMS population/community, and at least take the time to, if nothing else, explain as to why certain things cannot be changed."

User: "everyone who loves MapleStory hates Nexon."

These two statements are important to showcase an example of this frustration and unhappiness against the company. While the players love the game and playing it, their dislike for the way the company values them as players has stopped them from contributing to it in any way. This creates the backbone for consumer activism practices to occur, for a successful social movement there needs to be action which is done through mobilizing anger and frustration (Castells, 2013).

This is also supported by Papacharissi (2015) who mentions that the internet influences how emotions are transmitted and shown through 'affect intensity' where people are drawn to instances where they can feel strongly and connect their emotions to a place or object. What differentiated this group from a regular example of a social movement was the fact that this frustration and anger with the company Nexon had been going on for a long time. Many members of the server mentioned through all their years of being active within the community that Nexon had never listened to players concerns and feedback and always promised to communicate changes with the players but never delivered on it. One member mentions:

*User: "The biggest thing that has **never** changed in the 16, close to 17, years that GMS has been active is one very crucial thing - **their communication with the players and willingness to listen to feedback**. Nexon just chooses to ignore the issues that people bring up, and eventually things just go back to how they always are; people get frustrated, but just accept that things won't change with them, and eventually any sort of drive behind the latest uproar just dies down and is forgotten. This time it's different."*

According to this quote the lack of communication and willingness to listen to player feedback became one of the main goals the group wanted to achieve. Many of the active users in the server were aligned on this goal and agreed that it was one of the main frustrations the players faced with the company. This created cohesion and shared purpose for the members of the server, especially for people who had been frustrated with Nexon for so long.

For a networked social movement to be successful, its participants must be cohesive and mobilized to take action, it can be difficult to maintain anger long enough to create change especially on the internet where the cycle of information is continuously refreshing, however for the members of the Discord server they felt that their actions this time would have the most effect as it has lasted longer than boycotts in other gaming communities.

Another key characteristic the group displayed being linked to a networked social movement was the social relationships between members and leaders and how the group coordinated within the server. As mentioned previously the players who had long term personal connections to the game and considered themselves veterans naturally assumed a leadership role for new players, informing them about why it was important to call out Nexon, their history with the company and how the game can be improved.

User: "I literally started helping some new players with some stuff and as a veteran of this game, there is just far too much to explain in what to do to start players off without pointing out a lot of the anti-multiplayer elements this game has. Many of the new players aren't willing to check out guides I give them or links to Nexon's site on how to do things. The game is overbearing and overwhelming for new people to look into."

Although Castells (2013) defines a networked social movement as being 'decentralized' and not having any formal leadership roles, I would argue that there was still some form of hierarchy within the server. The main admins who were the creators of the server were responsible for organizing the efforts and putting the decisions of the group into collective action, as well as solving any disagreements between members. Within the welcome page and throughout different discussion channels there were rules and regulations that all members had to abide by as well as self-assigning titles that would be identifiers of how active they wanted to be within the activism efforts. This title was seen by all members of the server and displayed on people's profiles.

*"**Boycotter** You are a participant of the boycott! This role may occasionally get pinged for big announcements/updates.*
__Think Tanker__ A more active participant of the boycott. This role may get pinged more often than Boycotter for things like asking opinions about a particular topic and requests for help.
__Red Riot__ For former whales (Diamond/Red) who have tanked their MVP to Bronze 4! Some may say these former whales are the true backbone of this boycott. Send moderator a screenshot of your MVP screen as proof to get approved for this role."

The boycotter title acknowledged that the member was a participant of the boycott even if they did not actively participate in discussions or other strategies users had put in place. This role was more of a

passive role but still accepted as a participant of the boycott. The red riot title is seen to be the most active participants of the boycott behind the moderators of the discord server. These users are mentioned to be the 'backbone' of the boycott as they are the ones who regularly spend money on in game items. To get approval these users must prove that they have quit spending and show screenshots of their cancelled subscriptions. These users were regarded higher than the rest because they seemed to have the biggest impact on the boycott efforts as they were refusing to spend.

Interestingly the moderators of the group were not the main decision makers within the server but emphasized that every member in the group had a say in voicing their opinions through voting on different topics and discussing different tactics.

These hierarchical structures within the community may look like chaotic and informal groups trying to organize their efforts but I would argue that they are a prime example of how regular people can come into positions of power in an online setting and use their experiences this position to learn leadership and management skills. As Jenkins (2016, p. 156) mentions through the civic imagination youths engage in activism practices through utilizing real life skills in the online world and looking to role models that have authority. These leaders may not have power or leadership skills but through playing games and interacting in their communities develop and cultivate these skills in order to partake in civic practices.

In addition, another interesting point was that not only did this server create social relationships and allowed its members to feel connected to the cause, but they also demonstrated personal participatory politics. As mentioned previously there were several tiers one could identify with in the server which would label you as an active participant and be contacted more frequently for the boycott efforts however form my observations, I found that members of the boycott who were not as frequently active were still regarded as active participants without having to contribute. This was an example of heightened autonomy and how the internet enables people to engage in micro politics at different levels. Individuals could support the boycott by choosing not to spend or they could be part of the group without participating and still be classed as participants by the users in the server. This shows how the nature of the internet allows for a low threshold of civic engagement (Lee & Chen, 2010).

People are free to choose how involved they would like to be within activism practices and are able to move between different online spaces, taking their skills and experiences from one group to another. These small acts of resistance in consumerism contribute to micropolitics and are central contemporary social movements (Cohen, 2004).
This was a key factor within the Discord group as members were fluid in their activeness within the server, sometimes there would be days of discussions around certain issues and strategies and other times silence as people were "busy with their own lives outside of the boycott."

5.2 Consumer activism practices

This next section of the analysis connects the actions of the Discord server to consumer activism practices, how the group engaged and informed themselves, what tactics and strategies they used and how they understood their positions as consumers to use to their advantage.

The main strategy and connector that the Discord server used to act against Nexon was boycotting. Members of the server decided that affecting Nexon financially was the quickest and fastest way their voices would be heard, and changes would be made. This was also because a similar boycott was initiated by MapleStory players in the Korean server in 2020, where players would delete their characters and cancel their monthly subscriptions. This boycott was initiated for similar reasons with Nexons lack of communication with its players. As one player mentions:

User: "*In Korea during the scandal, they had whales drop gear worth tens of thousands of dollars, delete their characters, and quit. Those are the actions of someone who has decided the game (or company) is beyond ever being playable. Most of us in here are not at that point.*"

The users in this server also connected and invited Korean players into the server to gain valuable insights on which strategies to use in their activism tactics.

User: "is a Korean American user on Reddit who is now collecting revamp feedback to post on Korean social media. they are fluent in both languages and have been invited to this group."

The goal of the boycott was firstly to get Nexon to acknowledge player concerns and communicate new changes as well as directly take on player feedback and suggestions.

Moderator: "**To Achieve This Goal** *Use standard boycott strategies such as not spending money on Maplestory and limiting (or completely eliminating) game time. Spread the word and bring in as many people as we can to our cause. Have Bean Brigade members and other prominent members of the community join in. Coordinate in how-to-contribute and suggestions to better our cause. Regularly check in at vote-on-topics and cast your vote on a multitude of topics to help guide the boycott.*"

Traditionally boycotting has been an effective tool used by consumer activists, its low barrier for participation and its effectiveness in directly targeting corporations make it a popular tactic especially in an online setting where many corporations are selling their services to its consumers (Balsiger, 2010). Relating this to the gaming industry, the relationship between the developers or the company producing a game and the players is more closely linked than other industries. This is because the players usually have a direct impact on the revenue the game creates. The companies also utilize player feedback in testing

new content and try to keep its playerbases satisfied.

This element was missing in the MapleStory community as the main point of the boycott was because the company was not taking their feedback on board and refusing to communicate with its players. Which can directly hurt their revenue. The members of the Discord server knew that this was the case and used this position as a player but also a consumer to directly impact sales by cancelling their subscriptions and causing disruption within the community. One user mentions that they know the PR managers are aware of the boycott but are unable to make a public statement until the company agrees on it.

User: "There's pretty much a 0% chance the PRs are unaware of the boycott. The reason they're silent on the matter is because Nexon hasn't allowed them to relay anything to the community, not because they adjacent been pinged in X days."

This quote shows that the boycott was successful in reaching the company and causing disruption within the community, by not spending on Nexon the players believed they were making a moral choice about not agreeing with a company's practices, which gave them the motivation to continue with their activism practices (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006).

5.3 Using the game as an activism platform

Interestingly aside from traditional activism practices the members of the server utilized a number of platforms to spread information about the boycott and get other players of MapleStory to support their activism efforts. Among the different social media channels used the communication within the game itself was utilized to spread information. Members would coordinate in game, going into populated areas at times when they knew many people would be online and send a megaphone message that would be announced to every online player at the time. The participants that were most active in the boycott efforts also created a spreadsheet to timetable the announcements.

User: "I've set up a spreadsheet here with the timings for megas. (Megaphone) The plan is to Mega everyday just after reset and double on Thursdays when the weekly bosses reset, if you want to be added to the sheet let me know."

This turned the game itself into a space for activism practices to occur. Supporting the idea that activists online are the first to adopt new technologies to spread their messages. By going directly into the game and messaging other players they were able to reach the right audience in the shortest amount of time, doubling the effectiveness of their activism (Vegh, 2003).

Furthermore the moderators would also periodically ask the members of the server if they knew leaders of

the popular guilds so that they could contact them collaborate in spreading information about the boycott.

User: "reboot guild leader here, I can smega for the boycott every time I recruit for the guild."

This guild leader mentioned that they could add a message about the boycott every time they were recruiting new members. Through this they were able to coordinate and organize through their communicated networks to gain traction for their cause. Being a member of a guild is an important social aspect of the MapleStory community. Through the guild members were able to create social bonds through online mediated communication. As many of the players of MapleStory had been active for years within the game they had created strong communication and relationships with other players and were able to recruit new players to support their cause.

These guilds also had their own personal Discord channels and spaces on Reddit allowing more and more people to find out about the boycott. As mentioned by Siitonen (2007) games themselves are platforms for cultural production and meaning making and are embedded in cultural contexts. Using the game itself to spread messages around the boycott is an example of how online activists make use of new cultural technologies and media to spread awareness for their messages. The coordination with other members of the community meant that the information around the boycott would be spread to the right audience over a vast space and across different continents and countries. Which is a fundamental aspect of networked social movements.

Another strategy used by this server was writing a formal complaint letter to the CEO of Nexon. This strategy had its own dedicated space within the server. The Moderator begins by asking in the channel if anyone has experience in drafting and formulating formal complaint letters:

*Moderator: "***Owen Mahoney - CEO of Nexon Idea:*** Draft a professionally drafted letter stating our problems and request help. Have a number of us send this letter to any number of his emails/contacts that we can find in public."*

Another user responds, mentioning that they have a degree in journalism and that they have drafted a similar letter for a different gaming community in protest.

User: "I consider myself a good writer and I have done this before - I have been in contact with another journalist (Patricia Hernandez) and have a degree in journalism when she wanted to interview the Bloodborne community I was a part of. We wrote ceo emails and I spoke for all of them."

We can relate this to Jenkins (1992) civic imagination in participatory culture. The members of the server were able to utilize their real-life skills to engage in politics that matters to them. When members

leave one community, they take their experiences and skills with them applying them to everyday practices and teaching others what they know. These users used skills they had learnt outside of the community to inform others and help achieve their goal. Many users in this Discord server had real life skills in accounting, finance, journalism as well as involvement in other social movements which helped them apply these skills to the MapleStory boycott.

Memes and edits were also a popular strategy the Discord server used through remixing of different medias. By identifying the corporation Nexon as the 'villain' they were able to effectively mobilize others to boycott by using collective terms like 'we the player base are unhappy' giving the group a collective identity. Memes are one example of the civic imagination and participatory politics where users online create content (images, videos sounds) that remix original content into something new, they can also be used as a subtle form of protest where only the 'in group' understand its true meanings (Lindgren, 2017). These individuals become their own social actors and participate in activism practices

Remixing of media is an important way that people online engage with activism practices. Through memes and humor, creating spreadable media that pokes fun to those in power allows people to support the boycott without fully participating and committing themselves to the cause.

"Bronze hands" was one meme that members of the Discord server used to refer to themselves, which was a reference to a meme and a social movement that originated on Reddit where users were buying GameStop stocks and refusing to sell in order to make the stockbrokers pay double the price to gain their shares back. (*MapleStory, Official News*, 2022.) Solidarity with this movement was shown by using the diamond with the hand emoji referencing an unbreakable resolve to not spend. In MapleStory this idea was remixed by users changing Diamond to Bronze referencing the tiers that users can reach when they spend money in the game. Bronze being the lowest rank and Red being the highest spenders.

User: "finally, officially bronze hands, Keep yall's bronze hands nice and clean."

This media mixing is also prevalent in fandom studies as early fans were the initiators of remixing media content as a form of resistance and frustration. Memes have become a new form of protest within networked communities on the internet and allow people to protest but in subtle ways. In the Discord server many users created emoticons of MapleStory items with a cross on it to ban spending on that particular item. Others would use the term "get Nexon'd" which was meme of the internet slang term "get rekt" This term was used when anything bad would happen, associating the company with negative events and emotions. In this way we can observe participatory politics at play, for these uses creating a meme of Nexon and other funny images was a way they could protest.

Furthermore, I would argue that memes can also be another example of how consumer activists attach negative meanings to a brand in order to protest against a company's capitalistic practices. Anti-

brand movements show that by bringing negative publicity to a company's image they are able to force a reaction and response as the brands do not want any negative impacts to their revenue (Lightfoot, 2019). By remixing a company's brand logo into a humorous image to make fun of it the Discord server was able to create sharable media that ruins Nexons image while making them respond to the players demands.

5.4 Consumer vs corporation

Moving into the consumer vs corporation aspect of the boycott I turn to how the community were aware of their positions as consumers and how they actively wanted to spend money on in game items. They acknowledged Nexon as the key decision maker and the one who had power to change the game for better or worse but continued not to spend because they wanted a point to be made.

User: "We, the playerbase, feel like we are looked at as a piggy bank and NOT as customers/players. We are NOT being heard. We WANT to spend money on this game if it works! But we are ignored after a promise to communicate."

Although there is a clear power struggle between the players and the corporation the emphasis here is that the players are aware of their exploitation by the company and yet leveraged their positions as consumers to get Nexon to change. This in opposition to the notion that users of the internet and consumers are unaware they are being exploited and just engage in activities they find fun or interesting. People, especially youths and gamers online have a higher understanding of their positions in relation to those in power however while knowing that they might not be able to create a huge level of social change still choose to engage in activism and civic practices as they have personal attachments to the game or the activity (Lindgren, 2017).

User: "Coming from someone in a Union in Public Education, that's not necessarily the case. We've already laid out the foundation on what our Boycott wants to address We've laid out the table on what we need addressed. When it comes to the actual negotiation phase, you have to focus on the biggest topics first, and then work your way down the list."

User: "Honestly that's what boycotts always are: a stare-down. Customers stop buying, company ignores them, after a time one side or another breaks down. If anyone thought Nexon would fold within a week, they were deluding themselves."

These two members of the server discussion an important aspect of the boycott. Traditionally in consumer activism boycotting and Buycotting not only showcase this struggle but allow members of the public to

participate in them to transform a company's practices (Lightfoot, 2019).

This highlights a wider issue between the company Nexon and the players. For a company to have a successful relationship between itself and its consumers it needs to foster trust and reliability with its audience. The trust between Nexon and its players had been broken multiple times with the company promising reform and better communication for months. In multiple statements from the company which were copy pasted within the server the official Nexon team apologized for their lack of communication and mentioned that they were working on better ways to inform players. These statements were mocked on the Discord server as being disingenuous (*MapleStory, Official News*, 2022).

User: "Classic Nexon, love these informative updates, tip top communication (not)."

User: "The way I see it, the boycott helped peel back the film on a lot of issues this games been facing as of late - while Nexon has stepped up their game with some aspects of communication as far as a GMS Roadmap and Updates with the Server Stability Issues, their silence on other issues says a lot."

Because of the nature of the online world, people who participate in activism are more fluid in their membership, leaving and joining groups as they please (Stein, 2009). It can be difficult for social movements to organize and continue momentum and this is exactly what occurred in this Discord community. With many players initially joining in the boycott efforts, participating regularly and spreading information on many social media platforms and then disappearing when they thought the boycott was over.

User: "What we saw in the first week of this Discord is that every person that joined were ready to rally against Nexon and boycott, but over time the boycott became unmanageable and certainly impractical. People aren't angry enough anymore to keep boycotting."

However, as time went on and Nexon decided to make a statement on the player concerns many players of the game thought the boycott efforts were over because Nexon had acknowledged them and their issues. The moderators of the server connected with moderators of other social media platforms as well as guild leaders to try and continue the boycott and attempted to rally everyone into the boycott once again but eventually accepted that long term changes were impossible to achieve. A moderator mentions that it is difficult to maintain momentum when boycotting as many people lose interest over time and it is hard to get people to 'stay angry.'

Moderator: "At the end of the day, I just tried to focus the community anger/outcry into a more focused effort. But, when the community at large stops caring a month or two into it and momentum dies down, I

can't drag the community along the whole way."

In some ways the boycott was successful in challenging Nexon as a power structure, on the official MapleStory forum Nexon released a statement from the senior developers acknowledging players concerns and providing compensation to all players in the game (Nexon 2022).

"Of course, I understand that there are many ongoing topics and issues that you would like more communication about, and as you can see from our recent Pink Bean Bulletin about recent bans, we have even more ways now to speak to these concerns." (MapleStory, Official News, 2022.)

However, after this update many of the other points of the boycott were not acknowledged and the development team continued to update new content without continuing to address player concerns. Many of the newer members of the discord server saw this as a step in the right direction and considered the boycott to be over, however the long-term plays educated and informed the newer players that Nexon has given out compensation before with no long-term change and that the boycott efforts were still continuing.

*User: "**The boycott still goes on.** For those who doubt that Maplers do not care about this boycott, then why did Maplestory's website crash after this Memo was posted? I surmise that this boycott is more popular than people think and all eyes are on Nexon to act. There is a reason to keep pushing for change. Keep boycotting!"*

This is a key aspect of social movements and mobilizing online, as Castells (2013) discusses, networked movements online are in many cases short lived and fast paced. Gaining a lot of traction in the beginning and dying down soon after. It can be difficult to maintain mobilization as information recycles quickly in the online space.

This can also be a downside of a social movement in the digital space because the nature of the internet is such that information moves quickly over vast distances and news media has a sped-up production cycle to keep up with the overwhelming amount of information that is available to users of the internet. Rheingold (1993) mentions how the internet can facilitate bursts of action and activity in a social movement online which includes informed people ready to participate in activism at any given moment.

In terms of the MapleStory boycott although these issues were discussed over a long period of time the boycott and other activism strategies reached its peak when one user posted a list of all the issues wrong with the game. This became the spark that ignited the activism and boycott efforts.

5.5 Cultural differences Korean Server vs Global

For the members of the server, the previous boycott efforts have always ended in a similar fashion, with people losing interest in the cause or moving on to other games. However, this time the players felt differently as they were actually able to gain a response from the company and actual promises of improvement. Some form of change was received with the communication initiatives from Nexon and the compensation to the players, but the wider concerns were still unmet. One user mentions how the headquarters of MapleStory is in Korea and that the decision makers and stakeholders are the ones who decide which updates are implemented to the global server.

User: "there is also the issue of kms needing to "approve" things idk if it's kms specifically, but it seems gms is one of the last regions of the game to really get any meaningful information, and we are always last to receive things All of Nexon America has very little power."

In this discussion the community is comparing which decision maker between the Global MapleStory server, and the Korean server has the most power to influence the game. The CEO Owen Mahoney is identified to be the key decision maker so boycott efforts and petitions are all directed towards him, for people to participate in activism, they must first identify key decision makers and imagine what a better world will look like, through that they are able to organize their efforts and incite social change. Furthermore, we can see the differences between Nexon as a Korean gaming company and its global playerbases. In localisation studies, gaming is seen to be a medium that transcends borders but is also embedded in cultural contexts. This can become an issue when the game is not optimized according to different cultures and playstyles. Gamers in Korea are more likely to grind out for long sessions to achieve their goals over a longer period of time whereas western players prefer small achievable goals (Jin, 2010).

  The players of MapleStory in the server mentioned that all the content in the global server is just 'copy pasted' from the Korean one with no regards to optimizing for different cultures and groups. This created tensions between the company and its players, painting Nexon in a negative light as a company that only cares about its profits.

User: "All Nexon cares about is that we are their personal piggy banks."

This divide between the players that spend a lot of money in the game and the ones that are free to play also causes some tensions within the group. As the ones with the most influence are the ones directly spending on the game regularly. These users were referred to as "Whales" for spending thousands of dollars on in game items every month. The moderators and other members would constantly remind them to stop spending on Nexon but realized people had spent too much time to stop playing.

User: "the whales are the most invested members of our communities. They love the game enough to spend on, and interact with, the game on a scale most of us would be uncomfortable with."

Although the boycott lost traction over the span of a few months, the members of the server were still optimistic about the goals they had achieved, although Nexon did not address all of their points the main discussion on better communication was posted on the official MapleStory website and was updated regularly by the managers within the company.

"As we mentioned in the brief statement last week, we also know there are many more topics you are concerned about, and questions you may have even after reviewing the information mentioned above. We won't be able to answer all of your concerns at once, so please continue to let us know your thoughts and feedback and we will try to address as many of them as we can." (*MapleStory, Official News*, 2022.)

Not only was this community not only aware of their position as consumers in the game, but they were also aware of the organizational structures within the company Nexon itself. They showed this by discussing the roles of the community managers (CMs) within the organization and some moderators knew them personally or by name. These managers were in charge of gaining player feedback and communicating with key decision makers, essentially being the internal voice of the player base. One user asks whether a member of the company could be added to the Discord server so they can gain in depth insights into the company but then realizes it could create more tension within the group.

User: "Sorry to bombard you with questions, but I'd like to ask one more thing before I make a post in my servers regarding this one. Is there any intention for us to try and include CMs in discussions in this server? Or do we want to avoid that in the case where they're attacked and threatened by people who are emotionally charged?"

Moderator: "I have purposefully put "don't attack Nexon employees" in several different places including the welcome section so that CMs coming in or initiating contact is a possibility."

This suggests that the CM role within Nexon is on a lower hierarchical scale than other roles within the company. The CM is seen to be someone who participates in public relations and direct communication with the players but are also the ones who receive the most backlash when the company makes a mistake. Many of the players were aware that the CM did not have much influence and power to make decisions, so they targeted their efforts towards higher decision-makers at Nexon. The moderators also reminded users on many occasions that the "boycott was peaceful" and the main goal was to foster better

communication rather than force action further showing that as a networked community the server held its members accountable to adhere to the rules.

As Castells (2013) mentions communities people organize together to protect or fight a cause that means something to them, they can identify issues and key decision makers and put pressure to collectively have their voices heard and seen. The MapleStory discord community utilized the same tactics identifying the CEO of Nexon and writing a formal letter, but also working and gaining support of well-known players within the MapleStory community in general.
By leveraging the voices of those who had more influence and power the community were more positive that their efforts were being heard and that a level of change would occur.

User: "Famous streamers on twitch streams are talking about the boycott being dead / pacified. I think we should do another thread asking for follow up communication on the channel changes they made. Ask them how it's going, any findings, solutions, resolutions?"

Interestingly a content creator on YouTube published a video detailing the differences between Korean MapleStory and the Global MapleStory server and uploaded this into the Discord. Explaining that for Nexon the Korean server is the top priority and where the most revenue stems from. Whenever there was an issue within the game the developers would create a fix within 24 hours and give compensation to the players. Whereas in the global server issues are left for months without explanation.
This created a debate within the server over differences in consumerism between Korea and America with one user mentioning that "Nexon doesn't realize we have a very different culture. If we compare North America and Koreans."

However, another point to note is that the "global server" is not only North America but comprises of Europe as well as South America, in this way the members of the server did no acknowledge these differences in regions but rather referred to all players outside of Korea as being part of the collective "global server." Relating this to globalization and networked societies, the way in which people online relate to one another has become increasingly less around their geographical location and more about their interconnectivity and access to information.
The Discord server is an example of this interconnectivity as its members collectively refer to themselves as "the player base" showing that they have a collective identity and are united when addressing Nexon.

User: "We are customers first and players second. As paying customers, we have a right to organize and protest against a company that has immoral practices. As I've said before, I believe in the power of the collective and that we can accomplish great things united as a community. Nexon will not kick the can of problems down the road this

time. We must force them to take this straight on and provide us with the answers and actions we want. Keep fighting everyone. #bronzehands #GMSBoycott2022."

This call to action by a user in the server puts priority into the consumer identity of the members of the community before being players of the game. Mentioning that consumers have a right to protest when immoral practices are at play. The widespread perceptions of exploitation from Nexon and their viewing of the players as only 'revenue' according to some players led the members to collectively protest against their practices. While being successful to some extent gaining a response from Nexon and better promises to communicate many of the other points were left unaddressed.

User: "Isn't the boycott pretty much over? Over in the sense that people aren't actively talking about it anymore."

User: "we accomplished something p cool though; Nexon being somewhat transparent."

These two users discuss the ending of the boycott and although were not completely satisfied with the companies' responses they were happy that they were able to get Nexon to acknowledge some of their concerns and took it as a positive outcome of the boycott.

I would argue here that the steps this boycott initiative took were similar to Lightfoot (2019) criteria for a boycott to be successful. The members of the Discord server were effectively able to keep attention on the boycott through their networks and social media channels but also through involving YouTube content creators and Twitch streamers who were micro celebrities in the community to talk about the activism efforts and support the cause. Having a clear message and a call to action that was easy to understand and perform by many users made this boycott somewhat successful in gaining a response from the company. Although not being able to maintain the efforts over a long period of time meant that the boycott ended without all the demands being met, the users in the server were satisfied that they had made some form of difference.

Chapter 6 Conclusion & discussion

This thesis attempted to answer three research questions:

1. How did the MapleStory gaming community utilize consumer activism practices and strategies against the corporation Nexon?

2. How did the MapleStory community understand their positions as consumers and players of the game?

3. How did the MapleStory gaming community form networks to communicate and spread information?

I used MapleStory as a case study to answer these questions however this thesis only provides a snapshot into consumer activism practices within gaming, while I understand that case studies themselves are not reliable or replicable, I argue that this example provides an interesting insight into how gaming communities organize and use consumer activism to gain the changes they want. I believe this thesis provides a starting discussion on how people in niche communities participate in politics that are important to them.

In this way the lack of replication and reliability can be seen as a limitation of this study, as well as focusing on purely qualitative methods. While I was able to gain an in depth understanding on how this group organized their activism the data I could gather was limited and focused on people's experiences within the server. Any expansion on the data would have proven too time consuming and difficult to handle given the timeframe for the thesis.

Furthermore, my personal experiences and attachment to this game might have hindered my results as a researcher, although I was always aware of my biases, I attempted to maintain neutral when presenting my findings through excluding my personal thoughts and experiences. As mentioned in the methods section my personal experiences were used to enrich my understanding of the members of the Discord server as a case study while also easing my access within the community. However, this was also a limitation of my research as the data was interpreted according to my biases and lens as a researcher.

In future research, I would take on a more comparative approach, contrasting activism between gaming communities and directly engaging with users to gain their perspectives through surveys and interviews. Although my ethnography and shadowing technique allowed me to observe the group undisturbed, I believe a richer understanding comes from direct interaction as at points I was left to interpret the results through my own lens. A mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods would have alleviated this problem while improving the reliability of the study. In addition to this at times I found it difficult to use ethnographic techniques in a digital setting as much of the research into ethnography focuses on in person field sites and observing body language and personal queues. In a digital setting it was difficult to determine how to interpret the data as this type of methodology is quite new.

For the MapleStory Discord server to utilize consumer activism practices I found that they create social spaces in multiple social media channels to organize and interact with one another and foster strong virtual identities. This can be within the game itself or in semi open spaces and guild groups. Through these connected networks they are able to discuss aspects of the game with other users. The social space of the game extends to many closed and open channels for players to discuss many different topics.

The findings from my analysis suggest that consumer activism can be utilized through gaming communities for activism to take place and that gamers can also become activists when a cause directly affects them. Using a number of traditional and online strategies to achieve their goals. The civic imagination can also be extended to social groups outside of fandom studies and applied to niche subcultures, gamers and youths on the internet. It is a skill and a concept that has developed through people's adaptation of the internet in their everyday lives. Learning political practices and skills is more accessible than ever before.

The members of the Discord server often asked for feedback and suggestions on what strategies of the boycott were working and what needed improvement, users who had participated in other activist initiatives would bring their experiences and expertise and users who worked in communications and public relations would use their knowledge to analyze the company's communication efforts. In addition to this the members of this server also emulated a previous boycott that was done in the Korean server, connecting with these players and sharing information on how to gain better communication from the company.

Another strategy used for consumer activism was to identify key decision makers and stakeholders within the company and to target their activism efforts towards these people. By drafting and writing a formal complaint letter to the CEO of Nexon as well as signing and delivering petitions they were able to force the company into releasing a statement addressing their concerns. This is an example of a traditional activism activity translating into the online sphere and being used in the boycott social movement. The civic imagination also manifested itself through the community's usage of internet-based activities to remix and protest content through the creation of memes and humorous images to protest the company Nexon. One example of this was using the Diamond hands meme used by the GameStop stock scandal on Reddit. Users would buy huge amounts of stock forcing the stockbrokers and those in power to pay double the price to get them back. In the MapleStory community Diamond hands was remixed and became "Bronze hands" as a reference to not spending any money within the game.

The game MapleStory itself was used as a space for activism practices to take place, as mentioned in the previous research on the social nature of guilds. These groups utilized other social media channels as well as in game to discuss and create social spaces for the community. Players would join voice chat, discussion forums and streaming platforms to extend the social space of the game into different channels. The MapleStory Discord group also utilized the game as a space for activism to take

place through using official announcements within the game to broadcast messages about the boycott.

Guild leaders were also involved in spreading information and worked together with moderators of the Discord server to send messages to new recruits and in populated maps within the game. Another interesting point was how the members of this community were aware not only of the power and influence the corporation Nexon held in terms of decision-making and changes within the game, but they were also aware of their positions as gamers who could provide useful insights into game development as well as being consumers of a product and leveraging this stance to get an acknowledgement of the company.

This rejects the notion that players of online games and the internet are unaware of their exploitation from capitalistic corporations using their data to sell them products and adverts, I would argue that because the relationship between online gaming and its users are symbiotic in that they both rely on each other for the creation and distribution of content the players of the game are more aware of the positions than ever and are able to leverage this into creating social change.

In addition to this when communication between a gaming company and its players breaks down, consumer activism practises namely boycotting are effective tactics to use to gain a response. Players can leverage their online social networks to send and receive messages around the boycott and increase its reach and effectiveness. I would say that the Discord server was a prime example of how Networked social movements form online and an example of their life cycles. The facilitating nature of the internet meant that while people were able to form groups and connect with similar causes, it also made it difficult for them to continue to make these causes be heard.

This research attempts to start a conversation into gaming studies as places for consumer activism to occur, I believe research into gaming studies and activism has been alluded to in many works on participatory culture, fandom studies and subcultures but focusing on MMORPGs and online gaming as social spaces for consumerism and global identities is important in understanding how identities and social movements are changing within the online world. The case study I used was just one example of how social networks utilize many platforms and practises to resist those in power and incite social change, a multitude of further research can be conducted into this topic as more and more people utilize online gaming as social spaces, forming their identities around it. As gaming becomes a space for more social interactions to occur the way in which people form communities online will become more fluid and move from many different social modalities.

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