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The Unwritten Rules About Breaking The Rules: Collective Frames And The Legitimation Of Contested Practices Within Consumption Communities

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THE UNWRITTEN RULES ABOUT BREAKING THE RULES: COLLECTIVE FRAMES AND THE LEGITIMATION OF CONTESTED PRACTICES WITHIN CONSUMPTION COMMUNITIES

by

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DEDICATION

For mom and dad. For Bob, Jervey, Lewis, Flossie, Leroy, Lila Mae, Dave and all
the rest of my family and friends. But, especially for mom, your unwavering love,
support, and encouragement made all things possible. Thank you for everything.

ABSTRACT

This research explores the legitimation of contested consumption practices in the context of a highly competitive online gaming community. Building on prior research, which has relied on an institutional perspective to shed light on how perceptions of legitimacy form and evolve in the marketplace, this research explores the role of legitimacy at the level of consumption communities to highlight the ways in which consumers socially construct "collective frames" which give meaning to action and organize these communities. In the empirical context studied here, online gamers have incorporated user-created modifications (e.g., modified game accessories, or "mods") into game play over the last several years. Though these mods are increasingly common, they remain explicitly prohibited by the game's producers and their role in competition is heavily contested. I draw from the literatures on community, practice theory, new social movement theory and framing processes, as well as the multidisciplinary literature on legitimation to explain how consumers develop oppositional collective frames for the meaning and legitimacy attributed to an emergent contested practice. I then discuss the cultural production of inequality as a consequence of the legitimation process as the normalization of mod use restructures social organization and status hierarchy within the online gaming community. Qualitative data collection and analytical techniques are used to explore in-depth interview data, netnographic data, which includes online interactions in internet based gaming forums, as well as field notes from both participant and non-participant observation

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CoD ....Call of Duty

CoC ....Codes of Conduct

MLG.. Major League Gaming

Mod ....User-modified controller

ToS .... Terms of Service

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Modified controllers are cheating. We all know that. PERMA[NENMTLY] BAN
THEM all. Or was it [the developers] intention that the sniper rifle be shot dead
on the head faster than some of the assault rifles for those who go pay for it?...if
so, CoD is for amateurs and not TRUE competitors. And CoD should be viewed
as a game that is biased, unfair, unbalanced, cheater happy piece of shit
(jhonnydizznill - callofduty.com forum)

Other player's might think this as a joke and kinda nail [you for complaining
about modified controllers]...They're so common though, that they're often not
rage'd about. To answer your question though: Yes, they are bannable. Big time.
You don't hear much about it because rapid fire controllers have existed since
CoD's infancy. (rsjc741 - callofduty.com forums)

The brief comments presented above represent two distinct voices in the Call of
Duty online gaming community. Both comments are made in reference to a specific
community practice; the use of user-modified gaming equipment (i.e., "modded
controllers" or "mods") in the video game's popular online multiplayer competitive

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mode. Each comment represents one of the two prevailing ideals concerning the legitimacy of modified controller use.

What is immediate clear is that each commenter hold a distinct, and even oppositional, view of the same practice. Whereas the first commenter stands vehemently opposed to the use of modified controllers suggesting that the practice goes against the game's intended design and using disparaging language to call into question the moral character of those willing to use one; the second commenter seems to support the notion that these controllers have attained a degree of legitimacy among community members, further suggesting that complaining about the devices may be regarded as a laughable offense among members of the community and grounds for ridicule. So, which statement most accurately reflects Call of Duty players' shared understanding of the practice? Contemporary marketing logic has called for increased collaboration between firms and the customers they serve, gradually blurring the line between producer and consumer in the cocreation of value in the marketplace. (Schau, Muniz, and Arnould 2009; Vargo and Lusch 2004). However, this perspective has also exacerbated a classic dilemma among marketing practitioner's - which voices should marketers be listening to? The contrast between the two comments is apparent. What is less obvious here is which, if either, of these perspective has the potential to become the dominant view in the community, and what, if any, influence do marketers have on the process.

Comments such as the ones presented above are equally as common in the CoD community as consumers wrestle with the meaning and social significance of this emergent practice. What is being negotiated within the CoD community, as illustrated in contrasting the above comments, is the legitimacy of a contested community practice.

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The regularity of such comments representing both perspectives in the CoD community suggests is that the members have yet to reach a consensus on the role these controllers should play in online competition. Conflict over the legitimacy of practice represents a relatively common occurrence in consumption communities. As consumption communities form and forge their collective identities it is not unusual for consumers to have multiple, and even conflicting views as to what constitutes legitimate community practice However, the ongoing coexistence of these oppositional views of legitimate practice ostensibly contradicts the notion that a shared understanding of legitimate community practices is necessary for consumption communities to sustain existence (Thomas, Price and Schau 2013; Schau et al 2009; Cova and Cova 2002; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). Researchers have shown that a dominant perspective should ultimately emerge to orchestrate action and meaning in the community (Arsel and Bean 2013). But, as consumers negotiate the meaning of these practices, how exactly does one perspective attain legitimacy over another? Moreover, given the relative autonomy with which most consumption communities operate, what role do marketers play in this process?

Prior studies have investigated how meaning is negotiated between producers and consumers in market systems (Giesler 2008, 2012). While these works have highlighted the inner workings of ongoing dialectic between sets of actors in the marketplace that continuously shape consumption experiences, the market systems perspective necessarily presupposes a certain degree of homogeneity and consensus among consumers. This does not explain how the consumption communities arrive at the shared perspective that producers and other actors in the marketplace must interact and negotiate meaning with.

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Consumer researchers have also explored legitimation processes in broader societal contexts, where macrosocial institutions play an important role in shaping the collective frames with which consumer make sense of marketplace phenomena (i.e., Humphreys and Thompson 2014; Humphreys 2010a,b). However, less is understood about how consumers collectively negotiate legitimacy at the level of community, where the social norms and expectations typically imposed upon consumers by broader culture and macrosocietal institutions are often reinterpreted and, at times, abandoned. Additionally, legitimation processes are processes of change. This suggests that the legitimation of practices would likely impact the social structure of the communities in which they operate. In sum, both the internal processes by which consumption community members negotiate and legitimize the meaning of practices with one another, and the social consequences of the legitimation process for consumption communities remain relatively undertheorized within consumer culture research. The dissertation presented here is an exploration into the role that contested practices play in how legitimacy is established in consumption communities and how that process effects community structure.

Consumption communities are conceptually defined as assemblages of consumers who are similarly committed to a particular product category, consumption activity, brand, lifestyle or consumption ideology (Thomas, Price and Schau 2013; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; Cova and Cova 2002). A set of shared consumption practices has been conceptually and empirically shown to be both a defining element in fostering the sense of shared commitment among consumers in a community, as well as a source of tension for those expected to adhere to the collectively understood rationale, or frame, that unites

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members (Schau, Muniz, and Arnould 2009; Thomas, Price and Schau 2013; Warde 2005). Recent research in the market evolution literature has focused on how firms and other actors in the marketplace coproduce meaning and negotiate the legitimacy, or social acceptance, of emerging and evolving consumption practices with identifiable collectives of highly-involved consumers who share an alternative perception of consumption (Humphreys 2010a,b; Giesler 2008, 2012; Ertimur and Coskuner-Balli 2015). Whether considering a typical brand community (e.g., mini cooper enthusiasts) a fan club (e.g., Trekkies), a lifestyle or consumption subculture (e.g., hipsters), a critical question for scholars is how potentially unrelated groups of consumers arrive at a recognizable unified perception, or collective frame (Gamson 1992; Goffman 1974), of consumption practices with which producers must contest and negotiate.

In sum, evidence from the extant literatures on consumption communities and market evolution suggests that legitimation processes play an important role in the emergence of shared consumption practices and the development of the unifying collective frame that both defines the community and organizes its social structure. However, a limitation of this body of work is that it lacks a detailed theoretical account of how any one collective frame initially emerges among consumers to define and organize a given consumption community.

Given the potential for heterogeneity in consumption communities and the variety of perspectives adopted by those who ostensibly engage in the same consumption practices, this is a considerable theoretical oversight. To remedy it, in this dissertation I examine the process by which a new or emergent practice gains legitimacy within consumption communities. The analysis I present herein generates useful insight into

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how collective understanding is developed, how consumption communities are formed and socially organized, as well as how they may change over time.

Consumption Communities and Shared Practices. The last few decades of research on consumer culture have produced a variety of scholarly works on the internal structure of consumption communities. Importantly, this body of work has shown that shared consumption practices are what constitute consumption communities (Schau et al. 2009; Warde 2005; Schatzki 1996). That is, these communities are collectives of consumers that are fundamentally defined by shared and deeply-held notions of how "we" are supposed to engage in some consumption practice or activity. Further, consumption community practices are otherwise dispersed activities that are organized and given purpose by a unifying and collectively understood framework (Arsel and Bean 2013; Schau et al. 2009). Community members exhibit a sense of shared understanding and meaning attribution that are ultimately embodied in the sets of actions, objects, and outcomes that constitute community practices. The understandings and meanings are collectively defined by community members but also influenced by external events and other actors in the marketplace (Schau, Muniz, and Arnould 2009; Kates 2004). This shared understanding, referred to here as a collective frame, serves as the basis for social structure and stratification within the community as it defines which actions constitute the legitimate performance of a consumption practice, which actions do not, and what kinds of physical and/or affective outcomes they should invoke.

Many of the core concepts related to collective frames and framing were initially developed in Goffman's (1974) social-psychological work *Frame Analysis,* then adopted and further cultivated in the New Social Movement Theory literature in attempts to more

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adeptly explain collective action and mobilization. Collectively this body of work provides insight into how actors with varied interests and disproportionate access to social, economic, and material resources engage in cultural coproduction in order to organize and define specific collective identities and shared ideological frameworks (Goffman 1974; McAdam 1999; Swidler 1995; Gamson 1992, 1995). From this perspective, a shared interpretation of how objects, events and actions in a particular context are organized is a necessary condition for collective action (even if it is not properly a social movement). That is, in order for individuals to mobilize for action, they must first incorporate "a particular shared understanding of the world" into their personal identity (Gamson 1992, p. 74). Ultimately, the emergence of a successful social movement requires the development of a shared ideology, or "collective action frame," that challenges the status quo in a way that unifies similarly aggrieved individuals that would otherwise remain disconnected. The concept of frames and framing are not new to either the consumption community or legitimation literature and have been alluded to throughout this review of the relevant literatures. The purpose here is to add clarity and specificity to how collective frames and its related processes will be conceptualized in this research.

In the marketing literature collective frames have been shown to be the primary organizing principle within consumption communities orchestrating social life and facilitating the routine accrual and exchange of field-specific resources of that determine status within these domains. Thus, the development of a distinct, relatively stable, collective frame is important in the formation and sustainability of consumption communities. Notably, the contemporary literature on consumption communities largely

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takes for granted the presence of a collective frame through which they define and express their existence. However, as consumption communities converge on a frame it is often the case that multiple discourses, perceptions, and interpretations regarding the focal consumption practices emerge, are negotiated, and compete for dominance (Thompson, Rindfleisch and Arsel 2006; Thompson and Arsel 2004; Karababa and Ger 2011). Competing perspectives and framings often produce intra-community tensions and conflict about what constitutes legitimate performance of practice.

Thomas, Price, and Schau's (2013) work addresses intra-community tension as they explore the role of heterogeneity within the running community. They show how tensions within the community emerge, and potentially threaten members' sense of belonging, as notions of what types of actions embody the practice of running change and evolve over time (i.e., as practices such as competitive jogging and speed-walking become a part of the "running" discourse). Moreover, they identify frame alignment practices and resource dependence as mechanisms for maintaining community continuity and mitigating internal differences that emerge as the practices and concepts associated with running are continuously amended and redefined. Thomas et al. (2013) reveal a complex and dynamic relationship between the emergence of practices, social structure, and the distribution of resources. However, it is worth noting that although frame alignment practices help explain continuity in consumption communities, their presence and use by consumers implicitly assumes the preexistence of a tacitly understood frame and social structure to which members are expected to align meaning and practice. Ultimately, questions of how a distinct collective frame develops in consumption

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communities and the role that emergent practices play in this process have not been directly addressed in the consumption community literature.

Legitimation of Practices and Market Evolution. How consumption communities emerge and are internally organized has important implications for how consumers frame consumption, as well as for how other actors interact with consumers and engage processes of cultural coproduction. Consequently, scholars interested in market creation and evolution also explore frames. They characterize frame development and propagation as both a necessary condition for the cultural production that drives market creation and a potential catalyst for cultural shifts within markets (e.g., Karababa and Ger 2011; Sandikci and Ger 2010; Humphreys 2010a,b; Giesler 2008). The question of how industries, consumption practices, ideologies, etc. become legitimate has been a critical one in this literature stream. Briefly, legitimation is the primary process that facilitates both market formation and change by fostering shared perceptions (i.e., frames) of marketplace phenomena that have unconventional, controversial, or contested meaning (Scott 1995; Suchman 1995).

Moreover, legitimation is a framing process where actors continuously propagate competing frames that reflect their particular interest. In their empirical accounts of this dialectic process, marketing scholars devote the bulk of their attention to producers (e.g., "firms," "marketers," "brand managers") and consumers (e.g., Humphreys 2010b; Giesler 2008, 2012; Ertimur and Coskuner-Balli 2015). Their research has sought primarily to understand how producers strategically manage emergent and/or shifting marketplace norms and consumption practices as they attempt to negotiate and co-create meaning with an identifiable and fairly well-defined consumer segment (e.g., Giesler 2008; 2012). This

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literature has generated various theoretical insights into the process by which changes in cultural meanings and consumption practices have been dually influenced as both producers and consumers vie for their respective interests. Apart from some recent exceptions that I build upon in this dissertation, the majority of these studies presuppose a fair amount of consensus and collective agreement among consumers. One exceptions is Ertimur and Coskuner-Balli (2015), who highlight the plurality of frames among consumers as well as the role that discursive processes play in the evolution of markets. (Also see Scaraboto and Fischer 2013; Martin and Schouten 2014; Dolbec and Fischer 2014.)

Notably, the market evolution and consumption community literatures are approaching a point of conceptual convergence on the role of consumer heterogeneity in markets. Consumption community scholars show that frames are not held in equal regard by either consumers or firms while market creation/evolution scholars highlight competing frames among consumers in a given segment. This convergence poses three interrelated theoretical questions about the relationship between consumption community practices and socio-cultural change in the marketplace. (1) What roles do new or emergent consumption practices play in shaping the culture of consumption communities? (2) How do heterogeneous consumers, who vary on numerous dimensions of idiographic detail, collectively negotiate legitimacy and arrive at a unifying frame? (3) How does the process of legitimation impact social organization and stratification within consumption communities? As no systematic examination of these questions has occurred, what remains unknown is how frames come to be organized relative to one

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another and how this impacts their respective influence on marketplace outcomes. This dissertation represents, to my knowledge, the first attempt to address these questions.

The goal of this research is to take up the aforementioned questions by exploring the emergence and legitimation of a contested consumption community practice and its impact on social organization within a consumption community. I argue that the outcomes of legitimation processes bear significant influence on the way that firms and other actors in the field perceive and interact with consumers as they attempt to negotiate meaning and engage in cultural coproduction. I intend to demonstrate how collective framing, which has been treated as consensus in previous research, is actually the product of the legitimation process by which consumption communities are formed, organized, and stratified.

I use practice theory as a framework to help explain the role practices play in cultural production and meaning making within the *Call of Duty* online gaming community (Warde 2005; Reckwitz 2002; Schatzki 1996; Schau et al. 2009). I utilize a qualitative approach and rely on sociological theories of collective action and the marketing literature on legitimation processes to highlight the process by which a particular frame for the legitimacy user-modified controllers becomes the dominant discourse within the consumption community. I argue that the legitimation process plays a significant role in transforming meaning for action, objects, and events for various actors within the community.

This research contributes to the literature in two important ways. First, it details the process by which members of consumption communities internally negotiate

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legitimacy and how the emergence of a contested practice contributes to the formation of oppositional collective frames. Second, by examining how the emergence of user-modified controllers ("mods") as a dominant practice in the Call of Duty online gaming community impacts social structure and social hierarchy within the community, this work generates insight about how legitimation processes can contribute to social stratification by affecting access to valuable community-based cultural resources. I now turn to a review of relevant literature before discussing methodology and the preliminary findings.

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This dissertation draws upon a wide range of concepts and theories related to consumption communities, collective practices, institutions, social change, and marketplace evolution. In order to effectively explicate the motivations of this research, I begin this review of the literatures by briefly highlighting the theoretical foundations of community scholarship. I then shift the focus of the remaining discussion to the relevant theory and concepts the literatures on practice theory, new social movement theory and framing processes, as well as the multidisciplinary literature on legitimation and stigma.

Conceptual Foundations of Community

Contemporary consumption community research in the marketing literature has been largely informed by a rich and longstanding body of interdisciplinary theory. Initial conceptualizations of community emerged in sociological discourse to explain shifts in social organization during a period of rapid scientific advancement and industrialization in the Western world. Early sociologists tended to place community in direct contrast to modernist perceptions of society. Most notably, Tonnies' (1887) seminal work

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Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft describes communities as relatively small, rurally-based, homogenous collectivities of actors bound by customs, traditions, emotional and familial ties. This notion of community is defined in juxtaposition to the modernist view of social life in urban society as being grounded in more individualistic, depersonalized, rational-economic forms of human interaction.

Building on these initial concepts, subsequent theories of community have since expanded the concept and disentangled it from its geographically-based origins. Theories of community have evolved to incorporate the dynamic, hierarchical, and heterogeneous nature of these collectives, conceptualizing them as assemblages of individuals and institutions bound in social solidarity grounded in shared understandings and mutual interests that emerge from common histories and experiences as well as from varied forms of social and economic interdependence (Anderson 1983; Durkheim [1892] 2014). The notion of community has since been defined by a number of scholars across disciplines and from many perspectives; however, this discourse has not yielded a single universal definition of the concept. As such, scholarly discussion has given way to identifying and describing the unique features of these collectivities that distinguish them from other social groupings (e.g., marginalized subcultures; interest groups, etc.).

A brief review of both the classic and contemporary work on community in both the sociology and marketing literatures identifies a distinct set of commonalities that most communities share. The most pertinent attribute of community is the presence of a unifying discursive logic or a "consciousness of kind" among its members (Thomas, Price, and Schau 2013; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; Anderson 1983; Gusfield 1978; Weber [1922] 1946). Consciousness of kind refers to a collective tacitly understood framework

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that allows members of the community to perceive similarity and a sense of connection among one another. This collective way of thinking allows otherwise disconnected members to share similar interpretations of the world in which they interact and feel a common bond with others in the community who are presumably likeminded and have mutual interests (Anderson 1983).

The presence of a shared consciousness also fosters a shared sense of collective belonging or social solidarity within communities (Thomas, Price and Schau 2013; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; Arnould and Price 1993; Turner [1964] 1995; Durkheim [1912] 1976). This sense of collective belonging and moral responsibility to the community and its individual members represents second distinct feature of communities. Community members experience solidarity as a sense of obligation to both embrace and uphold the collective identity of the community as well as one's individual identity as a member.

Both collective consciousness and community solidarity are primarily sustained through the presence of shared rituals, practices, and traditions; which represent a third important feature of communities. Collectively understood practices and behaviors are symbolic in nature and tend to be socially significant for community members. Shared practices facilitate cultural reproduction (Bourdieu 1977) as well as demarcate and reinforce community boundaries (Foucault 1977). Established community practices also reinforce community membership by allowing members to assess and legitimate the social positions of those within the community as well as distinguish members from non-members (Warde 2005; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). Community practices as well as the requisite materials and objects necessary for their performance serve as resources for

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personal fulfillment, signifying membership and social status as members enact their community identities. Thus, one's sense of belonging is ultimately tied to both their understanding of relevant practices and access to community-specific resources.

The core concepts and theories that have emerged to define and generate insight into our understanding of community have also informed a broad range of marketing and consumer culture studies over the last few decades. In particular, the literature on consumption communities has largely been grounded in this work. Consumption communities are complex assemblages of consumers that exhibit the aforementioned features of community; yet, primarily organized around a shared commitment to a focal brand, product, consumption activity, or marketplace ideology (Cova and Cova 2002; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; Schouten and McAlexander 1995). The notion of consumption community has also expanded to include the role that marketplace actors, practices, institutions and resources (e.g., material objects) play in the social construction of these collectives (Thomas, Price, and Schau 2013; Schau et al 2009).

In sum, consumption communities are comprised of a network of heterogeneous actors bound by a collective frame and the sense of solidarity and moral obligation among its members; both of which shape, and are shaped by, community practices. This research is primarily concerned with the role that these elements play in how consumers negotiate the legitimacy of contested practices as well as the impact of these processes on consumption community structure. Contemporary consumption community research has explored the ways in which forms of collaborative and cooperative behavior among consumers produce new practices and understandings can shape communities internally and forge new markets (e.g., Martin and Schouten 2015). Recent consumption

community research has also underscored how emergent practices create tensions among community members. The resolution of such tension has, in turn, produced a variety of social outcomes such as the appropriation of new practices into existing community culture, community fragmentation, or the complete transformation of community structure and culture. Importantly, Thomas, Price and Schau (2013) show how conflict over the legitimacy of community practices among heterogeneous threatens members sense of belonging and then go on to demonstrate how consumption communities are sustained by the structure of resource dependency and through frame alignment practices. While their work offers a conceptually sound account of how established consumption communities maintain continuity, this presupposes the presence of an existing dominant frame that organizes meaning, fosters solidarity and orchestrates practice within the community. What remains undertheorized within the consumer culture literature is an understanding of the process by which sustainable dominant frames initially emerge and what role contested practices play in this process. Consumption community practices are social constructions. Given their dynamic nature, the meaning and social value of these practices is subject to constant negotiation and contestation in collectives where consumers have yet to come to a shared understanding as to what constitutes legitimate action. The remainder of this chapter is dedicated to a more nuanced exploration of the relevant literatures and theoretical foundations that motivate this dissertation and offer insight as to how the legitimation of new and contested practices influences the emergence of frames in consumption communities as well as how these processes impact social structure.

"Taste" and Social Order: Practice Theory and Social Stratification

The relationship between consumption practices and social class has been a persistent topic in both sociology and consumer studies dating back to many of the foundational works in these areas (Marx [1867] 2004; Veblen [1899] 1970; Simmel [1904] 1957; Adorno and Horkheimer [1944] 2002; Bourdieu 1984; Warde 2005). A seminal lesson from this broad body of research is that having particular "tastes," expressed in the form of consumption practices, signifies distinction and one's social status. When taste, or aesthetic preference for particular types of objects and activities, is socially constructed and collectively understood it reveals an individual's position in the social hierarchy (Bourdieu 1984, 1990). The social construction of taste is used to internally differentiate among otherwise similar others.

Bourdieu describes all social action (i.e., practices) as the outcome of a distinct aesthetic predisposition and the structural influence of the immediate environment, or "field," in which it is being performed. Aesthetic dispositions are acquired over time through a socialization process in what Bourdieu terms the "habitus," or one's social milieu (Bourdieu 1984, p.170). Habitus structures the embodied attitudes, preferences, and behaviors that provide tacit cultural legitimacy and social distinction through our everyday practices. It makes certain activities, ways of thinking, and perceiving the environment seem "natural" by making them routine parts of daily life. Moreover, it reinforces social hierarchy and class distinction by inscribing particular schemes of perception, thought, and behavior with varying degrees of social value (Bourdieu 1990, p. 54). The "appropriate" social activity has more cultural capital than alternative practices in a given context, or "field."

Bourdieu's initial conceptualizations of practices, habitus, cultural capital, and fields were primarily applicable to cultural elites, but these concepts have subsequently been brought into the marketing literature and further developed (Holt 1998; Allen 2002; Saatcioglu and Ozanne 2013; Henry 2005; Ustuner and Holt 2007, 2010; Ustuner and Thompson 2012). Most notably. Holt (1997, 1998) elaborates on how American consumer culture exhibits a hierarchal structure based on a consumer's ability (or inability) to enact consumption practices that embody differentially-valued forms of cultural capital. Holt points out that the ability to demonstrate adept skills, aesthetic dispositions, and cultural knowledge (i.e., embodied cultural capital) are particularly valued and signify status. From a practice theoretical perspective, embodied practices are primary form of cultural capital that allow acts of consumption to produce distinction and status within consumer culture. This is contrasted with other forms of conspicuous consumption in which status is accrued through the ability to accrue valuable possessions (objectified cultural capital) and garner "official" recognition from prominent organizations (institutionalized cultural capital).

Practices are conceptually understood as routinized procedures, understandings, and affective states/reactions that are collectively recognized as legitimate means to desired social ends (Reckwitz 2002; Warde 2005; Schau, Muniz, and Arnould 2009; Bourdieu 1984). Practice theory places the analytical focus on the continuous routine actions taken by individuals in their daily lives. The organization and interaction of the specific understandings, strategies of action, and material objects that constitute a particular social domain are central to analysis; as opposed to traits associated with the individual or a given context (Reckwitz 2002; Warde 2005; Bourdieu 1990, 1984). The

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performance of a practice is less the result of conscious effort or reflexivity, but more so the product of a tacit knowledge, familiarity, and/or a sense of habituation. Consumption is perceived as a moment in almost every practice and practices constitute consumption communities (Warde 2005; Schatzki 1996; Schau et al. 2009). Moreover, practices must be performed in order to exist. Practice theory primarily serves as a theoretical lens that will aid in organizing the findings in this research.

Stigmatized Practice and Status in Consumer Culture.

Not all practice is held in the same regard. Generally, stigma is applied to social entities which possess attributes that are "deeply discrediting," or that represent difference or deviation from what is considered normal, moral, or expected in society (Goffman 1959, 1963). Certain individuals, ideas, organizations, practices and/or behaviors are carriers of a stigma. However, stigma is not a fixed state or condition. (Dovidio, Major, and Crocker 2000; Link and Phelan 2001). Research suggests that as stigmatized practices are legitimated they gain the capacity to reorganize social hierarchy (Sandikci and Ger 2010; Karababa and Ger 2011). Newly legitimate practices can create new desired ends and give alternative meaning to old desired ends. As this occurs, consumers may develop alternative forms of discursive logic to construct social order and make sense of new practices. From a practice theory perspective, the concepts of legitimacy or stigma are abstractions that signify status or the social acceptability of a given phenomenon. In consumer culture social acceptance is assessed according to the cultural distinction signified by one's "tastes," or the embodied cultural capital

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demonstrated in one's consumption practices. Routinely engaging in stigmatized

practices, then reflects a marginalized or low-cultural standing within a given context or

field.

Exploring the various practices of marginalized consumers as they engage in

status competition with actors in broader society has been a long-standing topic of

interest for scholars in both sociology and marketing (Caplovitz 1967; Goodman 1968;

Sandikci and Ger 2010; Ustuner and Thompson 2012, Coskuner-Balli and Thompson

2013). More recent consumer research in this area shows how consumers with significant

identity investments in marginalized social domains develop shared understandings, or

frames, that allow them to compete for status with one another and combat negative or

conflicting external discourses (Arsel and Thompson 2011). This suggests that the

emergence of new practices and frames within marginalized collectives may play an

important role in challenging existing norms and organizing alternative social hierarchies.

New practices and frames can give social significance to new social markers while

simultaneously assigning different meaning to old ones (though they do not always do

so).

Notions of stigma and legitimacy are socioculturally constructed and ascribed to

material conditions. In a hegemonic sense, stigma and legitimacy are linked to structural

inequality in that what is stigmatized is typically a function of what is deemed

unacceptable or inappropriate by those that occupy dominant positions in society or a

given context (Parker and Aggleton 2003, p. 19). Accordingly, legitimation of a once-

stigmatized practice may represent a shift in power, the changing ideals and opinions

among those with power, or some combination therein (Humphreys 2010a; Sandikci and

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Ger 2010; Karababa and Ger 2011; Giesler 2008). The extant consumer culture literature tends to focus on these types social change at an aggregate level. From a macro-societal perspective practices that gain broad acceptance are typically granted legitimacy by a regulatory body or some form of cultural authority before they are considered socially "normal." However, less is known about how the emergence of new practices and collective frames operates at the meso-societal level; that is., within consumption communities. This distinction is important because many consumption communities lack formalized regulatory structure and what is considered legitimate or stigmatized is tacitly understood by its members. Therefore, certain assumptions about the legitimation process at the macro-societal level do not hold for this type context.

Practices, Frames, and Heterogeneity in Consumption Communities

This dissertation-based work builds on research that uses practice theory to attend to consumption experiences and social processes related to the production, distribution, and operation of cultural capital within the bounds of consumption communities (e.g., Schau et al. 2009; Warde 2005; Arsel and Thompson 2011; Muniz and Schau 2005). This research stream has provided valuable insight into the role of practices and field-dependent cultural capital across a broad array of consumption communities. From a practice theory perspective, the elements that comprise consumption community practices have a general structure that is recognizable across communities and consumption contexts. Performances of consumption community practices typically involve actions, the use of objects, and expectations of particular outcomes that have become routinized

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according to some emergent shared understanding, or discursive logic, that organizes these elements in a specific manner (Schau et al. 2009; Warde 2005). In this way all consumption community practices and internal structural configurations exhibit similar fundamental features. Where consumption communities primarily draw distinction from one another is in the nature of their discursive logic, or collective frame (Schatzki 1996; Arsel and Bean 2013). A unique collective frame is what tacitly emerges to serve as the foundation for meaningfully linking otherwise unrelated objects, actions, and outcomes in a way that is distinct to, and definitive of, a given consumption community. The collective frame also provides rationale for how practices link to both the accrual and exchange of field-specific cultural capital, as well as social structure and mobility within the community.

Structure of Consumption Community Practices. Schau, Muniz and Arnould (2009) provide a useful framework for conceptualizing how practices are comprised, largely adopted from the work of sociologists Alan Warde (2005) and Theodore Schatzki (1996). Specifically, practices are perceived as an interrelated set of performances, behaviors, and representations linked through collectively recognized (1) understandings, (2), engagements and (3) procedures (Schatzki, p. 89; Warde 2005, p. 134; Schau et al. 2009). Understandings refer to context specific know-how; familiarity with what to do and say in addition to a knowledge of the skills necessary to participate in the practice. Engagements refer to desired ends, goals, and purposes that community members exhibit a commitment to pursuing (e.g., status or ranking within the community, social or economic rewards, awards, etc.). Generally, these are valorized social markers that literally "engage" consumers bringing about certain affective states and representing

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desired outcomes. Lastly, procedures are the "rules" or the discursive logic, or framework, which governs what is deemed legitimate or acceptable performance of a practice within consumption communities.

Schau et al. (2009) argue that it is the nature of how consumption community practices are structured that allows the performance of these practices to produce value for highly involved consumers. The performance of consumption community plays an important role in both individual and collective identity investments, as well as consumers' pursuit of social status. The present work adopts a variant of the *understandings*, *engagements*, *procedures* framework. Conceptualizing the structure of consumption community practices in this manner allows for a more general understanding of the specific role practices play in facilitating the emergence of consumption communities.

Recent research on consumption community practices suggests that these collectively-defined and tacitly understood sets of practices reinforce a sense of collectivity among consumers in that context (Schau et al. 2009, p. 35). That is, shared practices represent the primary source of collective knowledge and collective identity. These domain-specific practices serve to organize social action, facilitate social learning, and the exchange of cultural resources within the collective, facilitating a sense of belonging for members. For example, Schau et al. (2009) point out how fans of the musical group Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers rely on concert attendance and memorabilia collection practices to demonstrate cultural knowledge, assess membership status, and degree of involvement within the community. Similarly, they show how members of the Minicooper automotive brand community use vehicle customization

practices for the same kinds of social purposes and assessments. Thus, across consumption communities an individual's sense of membership is a function of their ability to learn, embody, and enact cultural meanings through the set of domain-specific practices recognized among the collective.

While prior work has adeptly unpacked the social and cultural value associated with different field-specific practices within well-established consumption communities, these accounts have been fairly idiosyncratic. What is missing from the literature is a more general understanding of how certain practices become culturally valuable within communities. That is, questions remain as to how a collective frame emerges and gives meaning to community practices and how does this emergent frame come to organize social structure.

The Role of Collective Frames in Community Practices. Collective frames, which are discursive logics that have a structuring normative influence on behavior and social order have been observed with varying degrees of efficacy. Throughout society, such normative structures range from broadly-held worldviews (Thompson 2005; Crockett and Wallendorf 2004) to culturally-specific aesthetic predispositions that govern tastes (Arsel and Bean 2013; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007; Sandikci and Ger 2010; Luedicke, Thompson, and Giesler 2010; Thompson and Haytko 1997). These normative structures essentially serve as the basis for social order in consumption communities by providing social meaning and hierarchy. In fact, their presence is a necessary condition for the continuity of consumption communities and cultural reproduction (Thomas, Price, and Schau 2013). In consumption communities, collective frames are the normative structures

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that integrate otherwise unrelated actions, object usage, and outcomes in meaningful and purposeful ways (Arsel and Bean 2013; Schatzki 1996).

In order to provide a richer theoretical account of how the collective frames associated with a specific practice produce meaning and order, recent treatments of practice theory distinguish between integrative and dispersed practices. Integrative practices are constitutive of a particular domain of social life while dispersed practices describe abstracted activities found across multiple domains in social life (Schatzki 1996, p. 98; Warde 2005). For example, hunting can be viewed as an integrative practice in that it links dispersed practices like tracking a target, concealing one's location, or handling, loading and firing a weapon. Those same dispersed practices could also be associated with other integrative practices, like competitive paintball. Each integrative practice associates different sets of objects, meanings, and expected outcomes with its constituent dispersed practices, like "tracking a target" and "firing a weapon." These meanings and activities are, in turn, linked together for distinct purposes according to the collective frame shared among members in their respective communities. In short, consumption community members share a commitment to integrative practices like big game hunting or competitive paint ball, and all integrative practices have a collective frame.

Arsel and Bean (2013) provide an empirical account of how an integrative practice organizes, and gives meaning to, a particular set of dispersed practices in the context of household consumption (i.e., consumption activities that produce the home as cultural form). Their research highlights the role of discursive frames in linking objects and behaviors to specific symbolic meanings based on Schatzki's concept of teleoaffective structures (1996). Teloaffective structures are sets of appropriate ends,

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usages, and emotional outcomes that govern and organize practices by contextualizing them. In the context of household consumption, the teleoaffective structure is operationalized as a "taste regime" that orchestrates visual and material order for a set of household objects and consumption practices. These practices reflect the consumer taste ideals for modernist home décor as expressed on a popular interior design website. Hence, Arsel and Bean show how dispersed practices like customizing or documenting are linked and circumscribed within a pattern of meanings and values specific to the household consumption subculture; thereby perpetuating the routine performance of a particular set of behaviors. This is generally how frames organize and give meaning to practice.

Field-specific Capital, Frames, and Structure. Prior research on consumption communities pays particular attention to the operations of cultural capital within consumer collectives. Specifically, consumers acquire community-specific, or field-dependent, cultural capital through the skillful performance of community practices. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) suggest that some level of competition is inherent within consumption communities. For example, Schau et al. (2009) show that fans of popular musical artists compete on knowledge and concert attendance while and Apple Newton users compete on novel and wide-ranging device usage. This suggests that consumers are incentivized to continuously develop their understanding of which behaviors and strategies are valued in the domain, and how these actions relate to social rewards and outcomes specific to the context.

Highly dedicated consumers try hard to improve performance and accrue various forms of cultural capital as they compete for status within the consumption community

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(Coskuner-Balli and Thompson 2013; Celsi, Rose; and Leigh 1993). In these communities, status accrues as one attains community-specific goals and desired ends that are defined by that community's frame. It is important to note that consumption community practices are not static. Over time, consumers create new practices to gain strategic advantages in the pursuit of status that need to be aligned with the existing frame (Thomas, Price, and Schau.2013). However, not all innovations to practice are deemed legitimate or fair, even if they achieve the intended desired ends. That is, not all members of consumption communities perceive or interpret the performance of a practice in the same way or ascribe practices the same meaning and/or cultural valuation. New collective frames likely emerge from the negotiation of within-group heterogeneity and tensions that emerge as consumption community practices develop and evolve. Thus, new community practices are likely an explanatory element for how these communities form and change over time. There is an evident relationship between emergent consumption practices and how consumption communities develop and evolve that requires additional theoretical attention.

Extant research has been primarily concerned with how frames influence practice. Conversely, this research generates insight on the impact of the legitimation of new or previously stigmatized practices on social organization within consumption communities. Such insights are particularly useful in understanding the emergence of new or developing consumption communities, like online gaming, that are largely unregulated and where social norms are ambiguous. Detailed accounts of how consumers develop a shared understanding of appropriate status competition within these communities remains under-theorized. Questions remain about what factors drive consumption community

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members to establish a shared set of practices. How does a single collective frame emerge? Moreover, as practices become increasingly common, how do consumers collectively discern legitimate practices from the illegitimate ones, particularly in the absence of formal regulatory bodies? What are the implications for the exchange of social resources and the accrual of field-dependent cultural capital that result from legitimation processes in this context? A primary goal of this research is to understand the interplay between emergent competitive practices and the frames that organize social interactions in consumption communities. I now turn to the legitimation literature to review the process by which practices attain legitimacy.

Legitimacy, Market systems, and Market Evolution in Consumer Culture

Research on market evolution and the legitimation process addresses the formation, organization, and development of formally recognized markets. This body of work suggests that markets can form or evolve around emergent practices that have a developing collective frame, or that market formation/change can be a function of shifts and changes to existing frames (Humphreys 2010a, b; Giesler 2008, 2012; Ertimur and Coskuner-Balli 2015). However, the presence of new or changing practices is not a sufficient condition for significant change in the market. How markets evolve is also a function of how various actors make sense of and apply meaning to once-stigmatized or previously irrelevant social phenomena in a particular consumption context.

Recent investigations into legitimacy in consumer culture research have adopted one of two related, yet distinct, theoretical approaches. In institutional theory approaches,

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analysis focuses on processes by which legitimacy is achieved, with an emphasis on the role social institutions play in strategically constructing, framing, and reinforcing social norms (e.g., Humphreys 2010a,b; Kates 2004; Ertimur and Coskuner-Balli 2015). The study of market systems focuses specifically on the cultural production of legitimacy, or "authenticity," in the marketplace via the dialectic process of meaning-making between varied actors (e.g., Gielser 2008, 2012; Holt 2002).

Market Evolution and the Legitimation Process. Legitimation is defined as a social process of aligning a practice, object, or set of ideas with generally accepted values, mores, and social norms (Humphreys 2010a; Dowling and Pfeffer 1975; Suchman 1995). From the perspective of sociological and cultural theory, the concept of legitimacy initially arose to as an explanation for why individuals collectively submit to authority. Most notably, the classic works of Max Weber ([1922] 1946) argue that most, if not all, social interactions and practices represent compliance with some set of normative expectations that regulate socially acceptable behavior, or social norms. Norms exist to maintain some form of social order and are both explicitly and implicitly imposed upon members of society through varying types of authority. The sources of authority are manifold. An individual's willingness to submit to authority is a product of a subjective belief in the legitimacy of the social norms and the normative institutions that impose some form of social organization (e.g., family; state agencies, religions) (Weber [1922] 1946).

Recent consumer research based in institutional theory ranges from the study of legitimizing acts performed by consumers at the micro-societal level (Kates 2004; Humphreys and Latour 2013) to macro-level social structures that facilitate or impede

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social change (Humphreys 2010a,b; Humphreys and Thompson 2014). The macro perspective identifies three dimensions of legitimacy. *Regulative legitimacy* is the degree to which a practice is congruent with explicit rules and regulations set by a superordinate institution. For instance, a new medicine attaining FDA approval gives it regulative legitimacy. *Normative legitimacy* is the degree to which a practice is commonly accepted as appropriate behavior and aligned with broad social norms. Wearing a suit is legitimate when attending a business meeting because this meets with widely held normative expectations. Lastly, *cultural-cognitive legitimacy* is the degree to which a practice is taken-for-granted or tacitly understood in certain contexts (Humphreys 2010b; Scott 1995; Suchman 1995; Ruef and Scott 1998). An example might be the way that popular fashion, or styles of dress, for a given culture or historical period is typically only considered legitimate in reference to the associated cultural or temporal context. Subsequent consumer research has explored these concepts in detail and expanded the discourse on ancillary dimensions of legitimacy that have particular relevance in consumer culture.

Notably, Steven Kates (2002, 2004) explores the concepts of both cultural-cognitive and moral legitimacy within subcultures of consumption by examining how certain brands gain, maintain, and lose legitimacy among consumers in the gay community. Borrowing from cultural sociology, Kates (2004) relies on the concept of collective action frames (Gamson 1992, 1995), as a framework to demonstrate how members of the gay subculture use preexisting shared "frames" (e.g., ideologies or worldviews) to appropriate brands and their consumption habits into an existing set of shared social values and meanings. Kates shows how cultural-cognitive legitimacy

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manifests in the tacit recognition of a brand's consistent cultural and/or historic congruency with existing frames in gay subculture. For members of the subculture, interactions with brands that have achieved cultural-cognitive legitimacy seem naturally appropriate and often occur without reflexive thought due to the associations established over time (Kates 2004, p. 456). By contrast, moral legitimacy is described as the active assessment of a brand's legitimacy. Members of the gay subculture used existing frames and brand relationships associated with known brands as a benchmark for the evaluation of new or unfamiliar entities in the marketplace (Kates 2004, p. 459-60). Further, Kates suggests that the processes by which moral legitimacy is assessed may also create opportunities for the evolution of existing frames, but does not explore this notion directly. To this end, his studies also demonstrate how consumers actively draw links between external social developments affecting the subculture and the reaction of marketplace entities as a mechanism for developing new frames to guide their consumption decisions. According to Kates (2004) these newer frames are typically either assimilated into established frames, or serve to amend them.

Humphreys' (2010a, 2010b) examination of the casino industry organizes the legitimation process into sequential phases by detailing the specific roles macro-societal institutions play and by documenting their influence over the disparate forms of legitimacy. She demonstrates how public discourse gradually progressed from an emphasis on moral impact of the casino industry to a more rational dialogue concerning the economic cost and benefits associated with the industry's growth (Humphreys 2010a, p. 498, p. 503). Humphreys details how various socializing structures coalesce in the process of fostering the legitimacy of a marketplace for gambling practices.

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Humphreys also introduces the concept of territorial legitimacy, which is the legitimacy granted to organizations and practices as a result of having a physical presence in the marketplace (2010a, p. 503). Her research suggests that the physical creation or presence of a "legitimate" marketplace institution within a community, such as a legally authorized and regulated casino, adds to the sense of normalcy for a potentially stigmatized practice or organization. Ultimately, the physical presence and the public acknowledgment (via regular media coverage) of it reinforce the legitimacy of a practice or entity (Humphreys 2010a).

Legitimacy and Market Systems. The market systems perspective focuses analysis on legitimacy as a dialectic process of cultural co-production between consumers, marketplace entities, and institutions (Giesler 2008, 2012; Thompson and Tian 2008; Penaloza 2000, 2001). Brands, consumption practices and objects are viewed as cultural resources that consumers potentially utilize for both individual and collective identity-projects (Holt 2002). For instance, Giesler's (2008, 2012) work examines how the legitimacy of certain consumption objects and related practices is continuously negotiated between marketers interested in propagating a particularized ideal and consumption communities that often share an alternative view. From a market systems perspective legitimation is a constant process in which legitimacy is influx and best conceptualized as a synthesis of the competing cultural productive forces.

In general, a market systems approach necessarily presumes large scale consensus among consumers to foreground the dialectic process of cultural coproduction between producers and consumers. Thompson and Tian (2008) exemplify a slight departure from this approach and provide insight into how disparate cultural discourses, competing for

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legitimacy within a subculture, are strategically utilized and reconfigured by marketers to create new cultural ideals. They detail the process of "commercial mythmaking" through interviews with lifestyle magazine editors in the southern U.S. who strategically integrate and reframe conflicting discourses into a singular cultural discourse, reflecting the collective identity of the "new south."

Taken as a whole, both market systems-based and institutional theory research on legitimacy suggest it is a malleable state. It is also important to note that disparate forms of legitimacy (i.e., regulative, normative, cultural-cognitive, and territorial) can serve to reinforce or to challenge one another. That is, the different forms of legitimacy function independently, in that full legitimacy can be achieved (or challenged) through any one form, and that a given practice can exhibit varying levels of the different forms of legitimacy across social domains.

The Role of the Consumer in Legitimation and Market Evolution. Studies on legitimacy in consumption communities often adopt a macro-societal analytical focus (for exception see Humphreys and Latour 2013). These studies are often conducted in well-defined consumption domains where active participation also presupposes a certain level of tacit agreement among other consumers within the context under study. In these studies, legitimacy is typically addressed at an aggregate social level in that members of a consumer collective or subculture are often in negotiation with firms, perceived outgroups or cultural authorities over the legitimacy of practices and frames that pertain to their collective interests and identities (e.g., Kates 2002,2004; Arsel and Thompson 2011). Scant theoretical attention has been paid to the legitimation of practices among members within a given collective.

Moreover, recent studies on market formation and evolution argue that consumers, rather than institutions, play an increasingly important role in influencing market development (Scaraboto and Fischer 2013; Martin and Schouten 2014; Dolbec and Fischer 2014). This dissertation highlights how market formation and evolution can be a primarily consumer-driven process by calling theoretical attention to the ways that interactions among heterogeneous consumers and other non-firm actors can drive innovation and sustainable market change. This suggests that consensus among consumers is the outcome of a process of cultural coproduction and collective meaning making within a community that should be explored rather than presumed. Members of consumption communities exhibit variations across a number of social dimensions including, but not limited to status, perceptions of focal phenomena, and access to resources (Thomas, Price, and Schau.2013). I argue that producers are not necessarily engaging in cultural coproduction with consumers at large, but rather with a powerful constituency in the market of interest. Although previous research has come to recognize the importance of consumer heterogeneity, it has devoted less theoretical attention to the internal organization of consumption communities and power relations that undergird the social interactions that can produce consensus as well as inequality.

Additionally, recent studies have explicated how markets form with multiple frames and how these plural frames operate and coexist (Ertimur and Coskuner-Balli 2015; Karababa and Ger 2011). Thus, it becomes important to understand the social processes that allow certain consumers to be in a position to define and negotiate the meaning of consumption phenomena. These recent studies improve on prior research by acknowledging that consumer collectives can have a "dominant" collective frame or

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multiple coexisting collective frames. However, prior work often takes consensus among consumers as an a priori assumption, or it assumes that intra-community tensions are tacitly accepted. In this way extant research offers a cursory and dichotomous conceptualization of how consumption communities are organized within markets.

I argue that the frames that organize practice in consumption communities are much more complex and systematically stratified. I theorize that alternative (non-dominant) frames within consumption communities can be suppressed and relegated to subordinate social positions as an outcome of the legitimation process. I problematize the assumption that markets attend to consumption communities that either have a single collective frame or plural collective frames that coexist with relative parity in status and influence. I then generate theory about how the emergence of shared consumption practices internally stratifies consumption communities and plays a role in determining how they interact with other marketplace actors through the development and propagation of collective frames. In doing so, I shed light on how legitimation within consumption communities influences social organization and internal community structure. I now turn to the literature on collective action and collective framing processes that I will use as a conceptual "tool-kit" for addressing the theoretical gaps identified in the consumption community and market evolution literatures.

Collective Frames and Framing Processes.

In the social movement context, collective frames are the outcome of symbolic production. Conceptually, they are a discursive logic that effectively: (1) attributes the

subjugated positions of the aggrieved population to a common source or responsible party; (2) identifies current conditions as both unjust and subject to change; and (3) convinces adherents that efforts to change current conditions are likely to have a positive outcome (McAdam 1999, Gamson 1992, 1995; Dowse 2001; Benford and Snow 2000).

Importantly for this research, collective frames (frames hereafter) serve as the ideological foundation for how core ideas are symbolically represented, communicated, and juxtaposed against dominant views. Frames are the mechanism through which practices are assigned symbolic meaning and appropriate outcomes. Frames define goals and identify enemies and allies in the field. They in turn reinforce a sense of solidarity and collective identity encouraging participation (McAdam 1999; Gamson 1992).

In general, the sociological literature on framing offers a relevant conceptual tool-kit that will aid in my construction of an epistemological explanation for the emergence and evolution of consumption communities. In particular, Robert Benford, David Snow and their colleagues identifies three interrelated and overlapping processes relevant to collective frames: discursive, strategic, and contested processes.

Discursive framing processes refer to direct written and oral social interactions among movement members that occur primarily in the context of movement related events (Benford and Snow 2000). In their conceptual overview, Benford and Snow (2000) suggest that scholars should devote more analytical attention to frame articulation, a feature of the initial discursive framing processes that helps create the collective frame. Specifically, frame articulation involves members of an aggrieved population meaningfully linking actions, events, experiences and outcomes in a way that defines all

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of these occurrences in terms of how they relate to the shared interests of the movement. For example, frame articulation occurs as participants in a protest begin to develop a singular interpretation of the events that took place and the roles of the actors involved primarily through their dialogue and interactions with one another.

For social movements to occur actions and outcomes should be linked in a purposeful way and this should be evident in the discourse among participants (Benford and Snow 2000). Collective frames emerge from the interweaving of their actions and shared experiences. As Benford and Snow (623) write, "[w]hat gives the resultant [frame] its novelty is not so much the originality or newness of its ideational elements, but the manner in which they are spliced together and articulated, such that a new angle of vision, vantage point and/or interpretation is provided." Applying the concept of frame articulation to the analysis of how emergent practices get translated into the collective frames would allow for more nuanced insight as to how consumers in consumption communities negotiate and coproduce meaning among themselves.

Strategic framing processes involve deliberate goal-oriented efforts to deploy frames to particular audiences. They include bridging, amplification, extension and transformation (Snow et al 1986; Benford and Snow 2000). Consumer culture researchers have empirically observed three of the four processes (i.e., bridging, amplification and extension) (Humphreys 2010b; Ertimur and Coskuner-Balli 2015). However none have conducted a direct examination of frame transformation, which refers to a conversion from established meanings and understandings to new ones. A satisfactory examination of cultural change in consumption communities requires an understanding of how old meanings are supplanted by new or emergent ones. One reason

for this conceptual oversight is that prior research relies primarily on data that highlights interactions between consumers and non-consumers, generally taken from popular media (e.g., New York Times) or in-depth interviews. Such accounts largely do not allow researchers to observe transformation. By contrast, this dissertation primarily explores discursive interactions among consumers. These accounts allow direct observation of frame transformation.

Finally, the framing literature highlights contested framing processes. These refer to the ways actors manage challenges to the formation and diffusion of a collective frame (Benford and Snow 2000). Contested framing processes consists of counter-framing by challengers as well as disputes and challenges to the frame that emerge through collective action. In the social movement literature these disputes and challenges are thought to play a deterministic role in shaping a movement's structure and collective identity (Benford 1993; White 1999). However, their role in consumption communities is less clear. In response, this dissertation will provide a more complete account of their role in framing and in the formation/evolution of consumption communities.

Dissertation Overview

This research draws on new social movement theory and framing processes, practice theory, and the multidisciplinary literature on legitimation to unpack how contested practices attain legitimacy through a combination of interrelated social processes linked to the emergence and transformation of collective frames (Figure 5.1). In the process, I highlight how particular aspects of the social structure and the

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production of social capital facilitate contestation in consumption communities and the emergence of multiple perspectives of legitimate community practice [Chapter 5]. I then rely on an expanded version of the elements of practice framework to analyze the social construction of a contested practice and demonstrate how two opposing collective frames emerge from contestation [Chapter 6]. Finally, I explore how frame transformation processes and territorial legitimacy contribute to certain collective frames attaining a degree of dominance in the field and describe the social consequences of these legitimation process [Chapter 7].

As noted, frames involve shared understandings of consumption practices, and attribution of cultural meanings to them in consumption communities. This is in contrast to previously cited consumer culture research on legitimation and framing, which has primarily been concerned with the strategic framing processes (specifically frame amplification and frame extension). Strategic framing processes drive the propagation and diffusion of collective frames that are already fairly well developed. Consequently, this body of work has little to say about how particular collective frames themselves come to fruition, leaving a need for a more general account of collective frame development. This dissertation responds to that need. Additionally, it explores the impact of the legitimation of frames and their associated practices on the social organization of the consumption communities in which frame transformation occurs. Specifically, I analyze and discuss the social consequences of a frame for a contested practice emerging as the dominant logic of a consumption community.

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CHAPTER 3

EMPIRICAL CONTEXT: THE CALL OF DUTY COMMUNITY AND

THE MODIFIED CONTROLLER

This research explores the impact of legitimation on social organization in the context of an online gaming community. Call of Duty (CoD) is a war based videogame played from the first-person perspective (i.e., "first-person shooter" or FPS) published, distributed, and owned by Activision and developed in cooperation with Infinity Ward and Trearch. Originally released on the personal computer in October of 2003, it has since been released annually and made available on gaming consoles. As of spring 2012 there were an estimated 40 million active players across all of the Call of Duty titles in a given month. In the online multiplayer game mode, which is the focus of the current research, players compete with each other in every man for himself-styled free-for-all matches or team-styled competitions in a variety of virtual worlds or "maps." The team-styled matches players are either point-based (i.e., the team with the most kills wins) or objective based (e.g., capture the flag).

Studying user-modifications in the Call of Duty community presents an ideal opportunity for generating insight into legitimation processes and contested practices in consumption communities. In these kinds of communities, user-modifications often

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emerge as players develop and share new practices, or styles of play, that they then incorporate into their gaming routines. Innovations involving both playstyle and user-modification often function outside the scope of the game's intended design and must attain legitimacy through more consumer-oriented social processes. While gamers exhibit a wide-range of rationales and purposes for making use of user-modifications in video games, previous research on gaming and "modding" culture has narrowed the field to a set of fairly common motivations (Meades 2013; Nardi and Kallinikos 2010; Sotamaa 2010; Postigo 2007). User-modifications are usually developed to extend the life of a game, as a means of expressing one's artistic or technical ability, to gain or exploit competitive advantages, or for more malicious purposes like deliberately exploiting aspects of the game's design to harass other players.

Accordingly, both software and hardware user-modifications are common occurrences in online gaming and video game culture, at large. Recent studies on gaming modification have highlighted the proliferation of software hacking in the *Call of Duty* community. Meades (2013) looks at the impact of highly sophisticated technical modifications to the actual game play experience in what are called "infected lobbies." These are software modifications, which require a detailed knowledge of software coding, that are not readily available to consumers in the marketplace. Of note, Meades highlights the fact that various perceptions of what constitutes "legitimate play" exist among CoD community members. While the focus of this dissertation is on the legitimacy of modifications, the discussion is narrowed to hardware modifications, and specifically the use of modified controllers ("mods"), that are now available to the general population of players in the mass market. This research draws attention to how

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disparate views on their legitimacy emerge as community members interact with one another in the community. Although modified controllers and software manipulation (i.e., exploitive "hacks" and "glitches") are interrelated, and discourse on cheating in videogames does involve both instantiations of illicit behavior, this study excludes consumer discourse solely dedicated to the discussion of software manipulations to the extent that it is possible.

To this end, user-input devices like keyboards, mice, and gaming controllers typically play a uniquely important role within online gaming communities relative to other gaming equipment. The significance of controllers is best illustrated with an example from the data. In the following excerpt from an interview with a gamer named Todd, a 30-year-old college instructor and game designer, describes what controllers mean to gamers:

Interviewer: What do you feel like controllers mean to gamers? Like, how do they fit into the situation?

Todd: Coming from a background of actually running tournaments - I get to speak from couple of different angles. Controllers mean the world to the people that are playing. I mean, the most important, like, hard definition of what constitutes a game is it has to have some sort of interactivity. You have to be able to interact with it. And people, especially at the competitive level, how they interact with the game is crucial. It's just like a runner's

shoes or something to that degree. You need to, like, have this

and they depend on this in order to play at their maximum level.

Todd's response highlights the substantial role that controllers generally play in connecting gamers to virtual environments and to one another. Controllers facilitate interactivity and having a sense of command over one's actions and response is a central part of the gaming experience. Todd goes on to suggest that in a highly-competitive context having the "right" controller is, at times, analogous to runners having the appropriate running shoes or other similar such equipment for professional athletes. This is particularly true of the CoD community. Often, controller modifications are not solely performance-related endeavors but are also seen as an extension of the self and often reflect individual or group identity (Belk 1988, 2013). From the gamer's perspective, one's controller often lies at an existential crossroad. An emic interpretation of how gamers experience extensions of the self through controller use and customization reveals a two-way identity project. That is, the controller both mediates the simultaneous performance of gamers' online and offline (real-world) identities, and serves as a boundary as they constantly transition between these distinct versions of the self (Sotamma 2005). Many hardcore gamers (and even some casual ones) quite literally view their controllers as an extension of themselves that connects their physical being with the virtual world. At the same time customization and aesthetician of the controller is at times experienced as a physical extension of their virtual identities, manifest in the "real" world.

Over the last few years call of duty players have noted the increasing presence of user-modified controllers, or "mods," in everyday online play. This dissertation focuses

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on unpacking how gamers make sense of the user-modified controllers that have emerged in this context. In the CoD Community, the use of modified controllers appears to primarily revolve around self-expression and exploiting competitive advantages in the pursuit of community-specific status. In online gaming communities like Call of Duty, the accrual of valued social markers and placement on the community's various ranking systems generally signifies status by conspicuously indicating players' individual level of involvement, experience, and/or skill (Meades 2013; Consalvo et al. 2010; Sotamaa 2010).

The emergence of this consumption practice has been met with a degree of ambivalence and tension in the community. That is, the meaning and legitimacy of mod use is contested among the game's most avid players. The debate centers on the advantages that some controller modifications give users over others in online play. What has been modified on these controllers are typically the aesthetics and certain button configurations. The button reconfigurations are key because these modifications are, at times, designed to automate and simplify some of the more complex button combinations, thereby overriding some of the design parameters set by Call of Duty's developers. Most notably, this includes features such as altering the firing rate for certain weapons that are supposed to be fixed so users are able to shoot some weapons faster than a normal controller would allow. Consequently, playing with a modified controller can provide some consumers a significant advantage over the others as they compete with one another online.

Tensions over the use of modified controllers in the CoD community are attributable to a number of sources that are both internal and external to the community.

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The most obvious source of tension is the fact that the modification of controllers is explicitly prohibited by the game's producers and developers. Policies regulating the use of modified controllers, and online competition in general, are generally outlined by both the game developers (e.g., Trearch or Activision) and the console developers/online gaming service providers (e.g., Microsoft and XboxLive) which, together, provide the online format on which the game is played. Each of these firms provide their own exhaustive lists of regulations for online play in the form of Codes of Conduct (CoC), Terms of Use (ToU), and Terms of Service (ToS) agreements. The following excerpts are taken directly from the CoC and ToS agreements for online play that were created, separately, by the firms that produce the game and operate the online gaming service, respectively:

Call of Duty*Black Ops II CoC* excerpt:

Unsupported Peripheral Devices & Applications:

➤ Any user who utilizes an unsupported external hardware device or application to interact with the game is subject to penalty. *Unsupported peripheral devices and applications include but are not limited to modded controllers, IP flooders and lag switches*. [Emphasis not in original.]

➤ Minor offense: User will be temporarily banned from playing the game online, will have their stats & emblems reset and will have their leaderboard entries deleted.

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> Extreme or repeat offenses: User will be permanently banned from playing the
> game online, will have their stats & emblems reset, and will be blocked
> permanently from appearing in leaderboards.
>
> > - (Call of Duty*Black Ops II CoC* -
> >
> > www.callofduty.com/thread/200527300#.UiRbiF_D8iQ)

XboxLive ToS excerpt:

F. Cheating & Tampering

> - Do not cheat in a game unless cheats have been deliberately enabled by
>   the developer.
> - *Do not use unauthorized hardware or modifications* to gain an advantage
>   or disrupt the competitive landscape of Xbox Live. [Emphasis not in
>   original]
> - Do not exploit game vulnerabilities or glitches.

(*XboxLive ToS* - www.xbox.com/en-US/legal/codeofconduct)

From an institutional theory perspective these terms of service statements represent forms
of regulative legitimacy (Scott 1995; Suchman 1995). The language from game
developers and online gaming service providers is fairly clear and consistent in
disallowing the modification of gaming equipment. However, the use of modified
controllers is particularly difficult to detect and regulate. Thus, their use and proliferation
persists. The general belief is that this is because developers do not have the means (or
the desire) to detect modified controllers. The current system of policing violators is
mainly reliant on the community members to report offenses and provide proof on the

developer official regulatory website. Under this system of semi-self-regulation the stated rules are inconsistently enforced at best. Thus, legitimacy of explicit regulations is ambiguous within the community. This is consistent with previous studies on social learning in game communities suggesting that community norms are constantly "in flux, under negotiation, emergent in conversation, and only temporarily stable" (Nardi et al. 2007, p. 6).

Moreover, when modified controllers initially surfaced in the CoD community, they were exclusionary in nature, available to only a few tech savvy community members and their personal networks. Additionally, as third party markets have emerged, these controllers are now sold at a significant premium over standard controllers, making access to them fairly limited. Many players consider the practice of mod use in online play against others, who may or may not have access to the resources necessary to engage in this practice, to be unethical or an act of "cheating." As such, the growing presence of modified controllers is a source of disdain for many community members. At the same time however, the increasing popularity of mod use suggests that they have gained at least some degree of social acceptance among some CoD players in spite of the ostensibly unfair advantages attributed to their use.

Together, the simultaneous presence and the persistent nature of these opposing perspectives indicates that, institutionally, the Call of Duty empirical context lacks effective regulative structure. Competition and tensions within the CoD context foreground the constitution of legitimate practice among consumers within a community in a way that previous studies do not. In this way, this research represents an important and revelatory departure from studies in more stable or established market contexts,

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where the presence of a dominant regulative authority is often a requisite condition for establishing and maintaining broad social acceptance (i.e., normative legitimacy) for new practices (Thomas, Price, and Schau 2013; Humphreys 2010a,b; Fligstein 2002). Moreover, research has shown that tension and ambiguity are common occurrences when new practices emerge. Yet, how they ultimately serve to produce legitimacy in the CoD community is less obvious. In established consumption communities, new practices are appropriated into existing networks of meaning and "aligned" with an existing dominant frame (Thomas, Price, and Schau 2013). However, this does not explain how dominant frames that regulate action and reproduce legitimacy come to be established initially in consumption communities.

Additionally, the bulk of consumer research on legitimation tends to focus on the development of macro-societal forms of legitimacy and broad social acceptance; primarily drawing attention to the role that large institutions like the national media or emerging markets play in these processes. These studies have demonstrated how institution-to-consumer interactions produce legitimacy, as what are presumed to be fairly unified consumer collectives negotiate the meaning of consumption objects and/or practices with various marketplace and regulative entities (e.g., Humphreys and Thompson 2014; Giesler 2012; Humphreys 2010a,b; Giesler 2008; Kates 2004). Certainly, the media and burgeoning marketplaces play an important role in establishing legitimacy in broader society. However, I argue that some form of consensus must already exist at the cultural level in order for macro-level institutions, like producers and regulatory bodies, to facilitate legitimation within communities. And, as underscored here, current theories of legitimation do not explain how these requisite legitimation

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processes occur at the meso-societal level; among consumers in consumption communities.

In sum, this dissertation is concerned with how dominant frames emerge in consumption communities as consumers negotiate the legitimacy of contested practices, in the absence of superordinate regulative influence. I rely on the unique structural aspects of the CoD context outlined above to generate novel theoretical insight on contested practices, framing, and legitimacy as well as unpack some of the social consequences of the legitimation process.

CHAPTER 4

METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

The data collection process began in spring 2013. Consumers in the CoD community regularly interact across a number of online platforms and mediums as well as in a range of offline contexts (illustrated in figure 4.1). In order to adequately capture the nature of both the online and offline experiences of consumers in the CoD community, I use qualitative data from a broad range of sources. I employ netnographic data collection techniques and follow with qualitative textual analysis of online interactions in online gaming forums. I supplement this with both participant and non-participant ethnographic observations in a manner similar to techniques applied to analogous contexts in previous research (Kozinets 1997, 2002; Kozinets and Handelman 2004). Finally, I conduct several in-depth interviews with self-identified CoD community members in the southeastern United States, primarily in semi-metropolitan areas. I recorded, transcribed, and analyzed interviews along with the text-based online content as it was collected using Altas.ti qualitative data analysis software. Ultimately, the entire data corpus consists of archival and text-based data from 67 documents, totaling approximately 495 pages with the publication of these materials ranging in date from July of 2009 to June of 2016.

The Call of Duty online gaming community provides an ideal context in which to generate novel insight on the contested consumption practices as well as the processes and consequences of legitimation in consumption communities. Given the high degree of consumer interaction and the level of autonomy with which they act, the emergence of new practices and debates over their legitimacy among consumers in the field are a consistent feature of this context. The case of the modified controller in Call of Duty

Figure 4.1 Forms of Online/Offline Interaction in the CoD Community

presents a unique instance in a consumption community where the meaning of a once stigmatized practice has been somewhat transformed primarily from within the community. This context presents an opportunity to generate a clearer theoretical understanding of how the meaning and legitimacy of emergent practices is initially contested among consumers as they attempt to form a collective frame. By exploring how collective frames about the modified controller were initially articulated among

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consumers, and what factors contribute to a particular collective frame gaining dominance, this research will provide a more general theoretical interpretation of the role emergent practices play in how consumption communities develop and the way social order is established within these communities.

Gaining Entrée into the World of Call of Duty

Data collection began in earnest in the spring of 2013 as the author established an online account with XboxLive and created a unique online identity (i.e., "gamer tag") for the purpose of collecting ethnographic data via participant observation. The author relied on relationships established in other unrelated online gaming communities to gain entrée into the Call of Duty community as well as develop an initial understanding of the community's norms, vocabularies, and familiarize himself with the mechanics of actual gameplay. From this point, the author engaged in an ongoing experiential immersion within the community engaging in regular gameplay and participating in local events that are regularly attended by CoD community members (e.g., small informal in-home tournaments, annual midnight sales/launch events, etc.). I regularly used Twitch's live streaming and social networking services to simultaneously view live broadcasts of national and international professional *Call of Duty* tournaments on the official Major League Gaming (MLG) channel and interact with other members of the community. These kinds of community immersion and ethnographic observation techniques were fairly continuous and ongoing over the first 2 years of data collection but, continued to a lesser extent throughout the remainder of the data collection process.

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Data Collection and Sampling Procedure.

 Netnographic and Online-Content Data. Netnographic and online content data collection began in the spring of 2013 and culminated in the spring of 2016. The primary sources for this portion of the data corpus are summarized in Table 4.1. In sum, I capture community members' social interactions through both field notes from un-recorded ethnographic observations of online play, as well as through the sampling of transcripts from textual interactions grounded in primarily non-participant internet-based observations of online forum activity. The netnographic investigation into the role of modified controllers began with conducting several keyword searches on the internet relying on terms identified through data from participant and non-participant observation of online play within the CoD community. Terms such as "call of duty controller modification," "modded controllers in call of duty," and "mods in call of duty," were included in the search. The initial search results for each keyword were judged and thoroughly sorted through by the author for relevance, quality, and volume of content. This was done to ensure that the final data corpus was restricted to only the most germane discussions and online content. Chat threads from particularly active online forums and discussion communities were primarily targeted for inclusion.

 The sources for online chat forum and discussion community content were further restricted to chat threads from a few highly-active gaming websites well-known to members of the CoD community in order to keep the data consistent and manageable. The credibility of each of these websites was member-checked via discussions between the author and members of the CoD community as well as through subsequent in-depth

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Table 4.1 Primary Sources: Netnography & Online Content

Online Chat/Discussion Forum Websites:	Forms of Online Data for Content Analysis:
callofduty.com	Modified Controller Websites
gamerfaqs.com	Gaming Magazine Articles
neoseeker.com	Youtube.com
playstation.com community	Twitch Streaming Broadcasts
xboxachievements.com	
forums.xbox.com/XboxLive.com community	
bancandy.com	

interviews. All discussion community and chat forum websites are open to the public. As with other online communities studied in consumer research, participants in these *Call of Duty*-oriented online discussion communities range from the highly-active "core insiders," who tend to occupy more opinion leadership and avant-garde roles in the community; to more casual "minglers" and "tourists" whose participation in discussion is less consistent and engaged (Kozinets 1997, 2002). Special attention was given to capturing the full range of participant discussion in order to avoid the likelihood of this research being misinformed by marginal discourse or unrepresentative content. To this end, chats and discussions where multiple participants engaged in ongoing debate regarding various aspects of the modified controller's legitimacy were given priority throughout the data collection process. Lastly, noticeably irrelevant content was excluded from analysis throughout the data collection process if it did not pertain to the research objectives or the subject of interest. Carefully sorting and selecting online discourse in netnography is analogous to "purposive sampling" in market-oriented ethnography

(Kozinets 2002, p.67; Lincoln and Guba 1990; Wallendorf and Belk 1989). Netnographic data was supplemented with content from gaming-related media sources concerning modified controllers (e.g., gaming articles, online streaming broadcasts, YouTube videos), and communications from marketplace entities pertaining to modified controllers (i.e., game developers, online gaming service providers, and firms that sell modified controllers). This data was collected in tandem with the netnographic data using similar keyword search and data reduction techniques.

Ultimately, all online data content was organized, cleaned, and formatted to either PDF or Microsoft Word documents in preparation for analysis. The data collection and reduction from the initial online searches yielded conversational discourse from 43 chat threads from credible gaming and *Call of Duty*-Specific online forums and 13 documents containing web content from sources including online articles, video/streaming broadcasts, all pertaining to the use of modified controllers in Call of Duty games (with associated comment threads where available) for a total of 56 documents. Collectively, publication of these documents and online postings range in date from July of 2009 to March of 2015.

In-depth Interviews. Additionally, I conducted in-depth interviews with 15 members of the *Call of Duty* consumption community (Table 4.2). Data collection for in-depth interviews began in March 2014 and concluded in July 2016. All informants were purposively sampled using snowball sampling techniques as I initially used direct contact

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Table 4.2 Informant Descriptions

Informant	Age	Gender	Occupation	Education	Primary Game	Mod-Orientation
William	23	Male	College Student	B.S.	CoD	Modder
Jeremy	26	Male	Home Maker/Ex-Military	Some College	CoD	Modder
Rico	34	Male	Bartender	Some College	CoD	Purist
Ava	23	Female	Cosmotologist	Some College	CoD	Purist
Max	29	Male	Bartender	Some College	CoD	Purist
Hillary	26	Female	Bartender	Some College	CoD	Purist
Steve	39	Male	Tattoo Artist/Ex-Military	High School	CoD	Purist
Boris	26	Male	Short-Order Cook	High School	CoD	Modder
Todd	30	Male	College Instructor/Game Designer	Graduate	CoD/Variety	Purist
Flynn	19	Male	College Student	Some College	CoD/Variety	Modder
Michael	20	Male	College Student	Some College	CoD/Variety	Modder
Benson	20	Male	Electitirion	Some College	CoD/Variety	Purist
Tak	29	Male	Restaurant Manager	B.S.	Street Fighter	Modder
Arya	28	Female	PhD Student	Graduate	CoD/Variety	Purist
Tony	30	Male	Debt Collector	B.S.	Street Fighter/CoD	Modder

with members of the local community to identify participants for the study. As such, many of the study's initial informants provided contact and access to subsequent participants via their own personal networks. Such sampling approaches are familiar to studies in both sociological and consumer research (e.g., Oliver and Shapiro 1997; Crockett and Wallendorf 2004). I also contacted University-affiliated student organizations (i.e., "gamers" clubs) for participation, leading to additional participants through the snowballing approach.

The selection criteria for identifying informants were established to generate a sampling frame that would capture both the full range and variance of the characteristics of interest as well as reflect any relevant aspects of the community under study. Accordingly, the interview sample includes both proponents and opponents of modified controller use as well as male and female gamers into the sample to account for the full range of perspectives on the contested practice. All interviews were audio recorded and conducted in person with the exception of one interview which took place using Twitch and XboxLive online gaming and social networking services. Interviews conducted in person were either carried out at neutral sites or done in home. In home interviews allowed opportunities for participant and non-participant observation of *Call of Duty* players in situ where field notes were recorded and later summarized. I am also interviewing members of similarly structured consumption communities currently negotiating the legitimacy of practices to triangulate findings and check for the quality and consistency of the interpretive analysis. All recorded in-depth interviews range in length from approximately 39 minutes to just over 112 minutes. Finally, 10-15 informal

interviews were also conducted with various gamers and video game store employees where field notes were recorded for the purposes of triangulation and member checking.

Analyzing the Data

As with prior studies based in grounded theory data collection and analysis have been an ongoing, and simultaneous, inductive process (Glaser and Strauss [1967] 2009; Strauss and Corbin 1990). The author entered the setting with limited knowledge of the context and in absence of any a priori theorization regarding the focal phenomena and/or any related social processes and consequences. Accordingly, the author has been attentive to his own theoretical and sociocultural biases throughout the process of data collection and analysis. Analysis of the data has been both continuous and iterative with the author relying on negative case analysis and returning to the extant literature intermittently to balance the findings and place boundary condition on emergent themes.

Specifically, I coded and analyzed the interview data, netnographic data, media articles concerning user-modified equipment from popular gaming magazines as well as advertisements and press releases from firms servicing the modified controllers market along with the other data sources as it was collected via the part-whole process of hermeneutic analysis (Thompson 1997). I employed intratextual analysis, treating each data point as a distinct representation of meaning, followed by intertextual analysis to elicit common themes across the data points. My goal is to capture the most recurrent attributions of meaning ascribed to the practices and framing processes under study within the Call of Duty online gaming community. Data collection ceased once stability

in interpretation was reached and new themes were non-emergent. The remaining chapters of this dissertation are dedicated to the analysis of the empirical findings and followed by a brief concluding discussion, summarizing the key contributions of this research and highlighting the relevant theoretical and practical implications.

CHAPTER 5

CALL OF DUTY COMMUNITY STRUCTURE AND MECHANISMS OF

SOCIALIZATION

The remainder of this dissertation focuses on the analysis and discussion of the

data. The empirical analysis yields a theoretical model of legitimation and frame

transformation at the level of community; summarized in figure 5.1. On the far left, the

model illustrates the relationships between the elements of cultural reproduction that

contribute to the emergence of contested practices and collective frame formation in

consumption communities. The center box represents the process by which practices

attain legitimacy through frame transformation. And on the far right is a representation of

the relationship between legitimate community practices, social structure and dominant

frames present in established communities that have been explored and recognized in

previous studies (e.g., Thomas Price, and Schau 2013). The discussion of the data in this

and subsequent chapters revolves around explicating the social conditions, elements, and

processes represented in this model.

In this chapter I investigate and elaborate on the social structure of the Call of

Duty community using the theory of fields as well as concepts from institutional theory

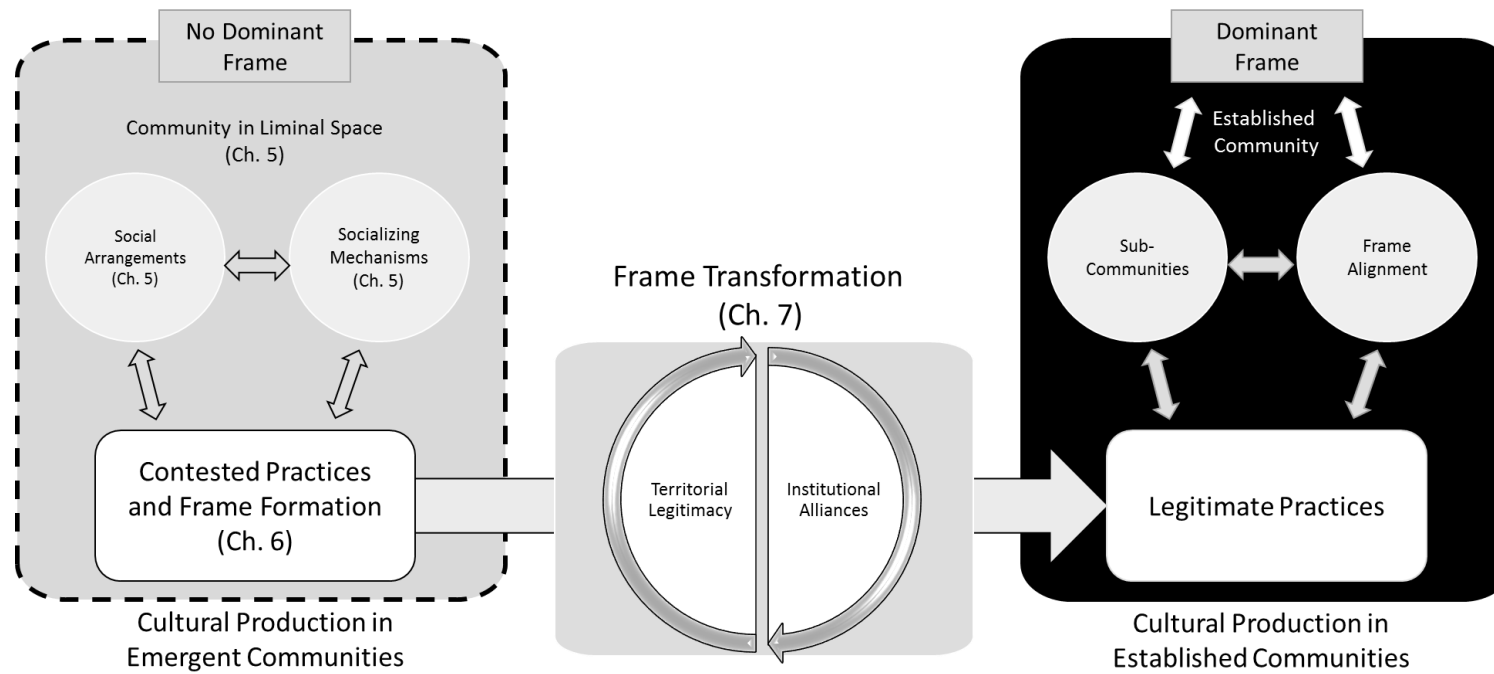and the literature on legitimation. I do so in order to highlight the aspects of this

Figure 5.1 Community-level Legitimation Processes as Frame Transformation

community that facilitate the emergence of contested perspectives of legitimate practices. The theory of fields posits that the social world is constituted by a range of distinct, yet interrelated, homologous social domains, or "fields" (Warde 2004; Bourdieu 1977). As an analytical framework, the theory of the fields assumes that actors who engage with one another in the same social domain are constantly trying to produce a stable and uniquely identifiable environment (Fligstein 2002; Bourdieu 1977; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). In essence, they aim to produce consistent social order by giving their respective field a discernable social structure. Within fields actors vie for dominance through attempts to create, and impose, frames of meaning that allow them to reproduce their interests. In turn, these frames of meaning produce status hierarchies and systems of valuation that determine the social positions of all relevant entities within the field. In sum, the social structure of a field can be defined by three interrelated factors: a set of hierarchical social relations among actors in the field; the sets of routines and practices that actors perform in their day-to-day social interactions; and the set of regulative principles, or rules, that organize thought and action within the field (Fligstein 2002, p. 29).

At the macro-societal level, regulative principles are typically prescribed and reinforced by superordinate entities or institutions that exist within the field (Humphreys 2010b; Humphreys and Thompson 2014). They are ultimately used by actors to form social norms, make sense of their day-to-day circumstances, and determine the legitimacy of existing and emergent practices. In the paragraphs below I conceptualize the CoD community as a field and discuss how specific aspects of the emergent field of Call of Duty relate to contestation over the legitimacy of practices.

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In much the same fashion that status-based social structure emerges and is enacted in broader society, consumption communities are often stratified into reputational hierarchies based on community-specific criteria (Schau et al. 2009; Holt 1998; Bourdieu 1984; Warner, Meeker, and Eells 1949; Weber 1946). In the Call of Duty community social hierarchy is in essence, organized around the pursuit of varied forms of symbolic capital and desired end-states, namely skill and experience. These are the basis of status and social mobility within the CoD community, and they are signified through a number of collectively recognized social markers including player statistics, skill-based metrics, experience points (XP) and prestige, score, weapon levels, icons, titles or other related in-game unlocks. These items and achievements are the functional equivalent of social "rewards" that CoD players use to signify and evaluate things like skill-level or experience.

The following exchange between several members of the community in a discussion forum demonstrates how players' statistical profiles function as forms of symbolic capital. They use personal kill-to-death (K/D) and win-to-loss ratios (w/l) to ascribe social value the use of modified equipment:

Validation: People who use Modded Controllers only use them because they're unable to use the guns as they are.

CorpseGrinder: I have a 3.72 K/D and a 2.66 w/l. If I buy one, do I automatically become shit?

EpsilonEridani: I have a 4.3 K/D and 5.2 w/l and yes you are crap and a modded pad wouldn't help.

Gunyoudown978: I have a 10.03 K/D and a 7.00 w/l so u both are crap. I don't really care for modded controllers…As long as I'm getting kills I don't care.

This exchange highlights the social value of these forms of symbolic capital and demonstrates their functional role in the CoD community. True to the community's competitive nature, the second commenter's presumptuous attempt to ridicule the previous commenter, while validating his/her statement with statistics, served as motivation for others to signify their social standing. These players repeatedly use the K/D and w/l ratios here to validate their opinions on modified controllers. More subtly, they also signify their respective social positioning, while simultaneously belittling the position of others. Each successive commenter used similar verbiage to ridicule the preceding commenter while substituting in their statistics to signify increasingly higher status. Among all social signifiers the combination of prestige and certain elements of player's statistical profile, particularly the K/D ratio, have traditionally been used as a means of ascertaining a player's true capabilities (Meades 2013, p. 66). Prestige follows a military style ranking system (i.e., private, private 1st class, and so forth) as players progress through various game modes and receive experience points. These social markers operate as symbolic capital within the CoD community, allowing players to socially locate one another within the community hierarchy on the basis of skill and experience. This is particularly true of the K/D ratio, which allows players to distinguish those who have little skill but play often from those who are highly proficient.

The Call of Duty developers also provide a worldwide leaderboard, which keeps track of, and order ranks, online players according to the aforesaid skill-based metrics and player statistics. As in most competitive communities, occupying space near the top of the leaderboard in any of the available categories bears some social significance. However, while certain statistics like K/D ratio have remained relatively static over time as indicators of skill and experience, the actual social value of a given player's statistical profile is less stable and not fully known until it is contextualized within the community. For example, a K/D ratio of 1.5 may have held more value in earlier iterations of the game than it does in the later releases as players develop more efficient strategies to compete for this symbolic capital.

The exchange among community members in the above excerpt also demonstrates the hierarchical nature of the system of stratification within CoD community. References to K/D, prestige, and rank were abundant throughout the data corpus and often used to make direct comparisons with other players. These virtual positional markers are intended to reinforce status boundaries among players who share an understanding of their social value and meaning. Ultimately, the symbolic capital acquired in the process of playing Call of Duty aids community members in engaging in community practices like "staking," "milestoning," and "badging" identified by Schau et al. (2009). For instance, the social markers attained in competing practices (e.g., prestige) make social positions plainly identifiable. This, in turn, makes the practice of staking (i.e., recognizing member variance as well as intragroup similarity and distinction within community) much less complicated. This activity combined with the in-game ranking indicator system also makes the practice of badging easier.

Moreover, community members take pride in their statistical profiles. They seek to develop and protect impressive rank and K/D ratios in a similar fashion as the accrued field-specific capital in previous studies of consumption practices (e.g., Holt 1995; Schau et al. 2009). The data show that community members often take explicit offense when their social standing is called into question, as in being referred to as a "noob" (i.e., an amateur or "newbie"). For instance, in another discussion forum on callofduty.com members were again debating the role of modified controllers when one player was accused of being a "noob" for complaining. The accused then defended himself stating "Don't you even dare call me a noob… and for the record I've got a 2.0 K/D, I know what I'm doing and am far from a noob. Also, I finished out the whole game…I have a right to complain." Of note is the use of K/D in association with experience (e.g., "I finished out the whole game") to demonstrate his position of authority. The accused felt he had "a right to complain" due to his status.

Notably, it is continuously necessary to validate one's status with embodied performances and behaviors in the CoD community. This is because in nascent fields, the set of hierarchical social relations is unsolidified and the value, meaning, and significance of many social markers that players compete for remains somewhat fluid and circumstantial (Fligstein 2002, p. 76). This, in turn, contributes to a tacit sense of uncertainty for members of the field regarding their role and social location in the community. Essentially, players struggle to maintain a sense of what constitutes a "good player." As mentioned, many of the metrics, emblems, and achievements found in the game are initially set by the game's designers to signal social positioning; however, the cultural value of these forms of symbolic capital are legitimized by members of the

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community through adroit performance in competition. Their value and meaning is dynamic and subject to change across contexts and over time. The process of reinterpreting and ascribing value to symbolic capital based on embodied performance is evident in the following excerpt from an interview with Rico (34yrs-old - bartender), as he describes how he evaluates the competition:

Interviewer: How do you tell if someone's good at the game?

Rico: If he's killing me more than anybody else is, he's good. He's getting a draw on me more than I'm getting the draw on him, because every time I get killed, I look to see who kills me. And I'm always checking to see whose number one. I'm always checking to see who's doing the best on the other team…Plus if you're in that lobby with the same person, normally the person that's number is number one, two and three continuously. [When this happens] it's not a fluke that you're good at the game…

Interviewer: So what are some of the indicators? Like what do you look at?

Rico: I don't look at anything. I just play with them. Because I don't think that emblem on the side of the screen means anything. That just means they play a lot. I mean it could either mean that they play excessively and terribly, or they don't play very much

and they're really good, because you accumulate points as far as how good you do. So somebody could just be sitting in their house all day and sucking, but they're accumulating a lot of points because they just play mass quantities. I don't really look at that. I don't really like to have any of that in my head anyway…I like to see how good they are by playing with them.

Rico's comments show that status and reputation are derived from a combination of factors. He does not make presumptions about other's level of skill based on their rank or the emblems displayed by their name. Rico makes carful observations during game play and allows his performance-based assessment to inform him about the actual value of the symbolic capital being exhibited. In the CoD community, players are continuously assessing the validity of the social markers displayed by others. They are constantly studying each other's performance, discerning between truly skilled players, deserving of reverence for having earned symbolic capital the "right way," and bad players for whom these same social markers signify stigma because they play the game "excessively and terribly" or they use illegitimate means to pursue recognized status symbols. These kinds of assessments and evaluations occur in both competitive and cooperative settings.

In true postmodern consumer cultural form, Rico's comments highlight the nature of the reflexivity involved in how community members collectively make sense of the cultural resources that exist in the market (Schau et al. 2009; Firat and Venktesh 1995). Consumers in the CoD community engage in the coproduction of value by interpreting and reevaluating the resources that producers have provided to convey status. As illustrated in the preceding quote, players combine the producer-derived valuation of the

various forms of symbolic capital with forms of emergent cultural knowledge to shape their understandings of where CoD community members should be situated within the social hierarchy.

For players like Rico, emblems and other such social markers are only partial indicators of status within the community. Taken in isolation, they do not fully allow members to draw distinctions or evaluate things skill and experience. From a practice theory perspective, these social markers are institutionalized forms of cultural capital that is intended to signal and "certify" the existence of culturally-valued embodied skills, as designated by the game's producers (Holt 1997, 1998; Bourdieu 1984). Socially, they operate much in the same way as certifications, degrees, and diplomas, which are intended to signify the existence of procedural knowledge and relevant skills in academic and professional social domains.

While forms of institutional cultural capital may, at times, serve as status-granting symbolic capital, they are not always one and the same. As has been well-established in other social domains, overall status within a community is typically a function of both institutional sources and informal, tacit understandings based on aesthetic, moral, and/or personal beliefs and behaviors that emerge endogenously and embodied in practice (Holt 1998; Warner et al. 1949).

Yet, for CoD players the in-game status markers that structure hierarchy, social stratification, and establish the trajectory of social mobility within the community are subject to conflicting interpretations. This is at least in part due to the lack of regulative institutional influence that would typically expedite the emergence of a single collective

understanding of these items and restrict competing interpretations from taking hold. As such, members of the community recognize the pursuit of impressive player statistics, skill-based metrics, and other desired ends as a legitimate endeavor and that these items and achievements have the potential to indicate status. However, in the midst of competition, these social markers are often perceived as forms of institutionalized cultural capital that equally have the potential to signify less desirable meanings. Thus, in situ, institutionalized cultural capital only becomes symbolic capital (i.e., worthy of status) once it is tied to players' subjective conceptualizations of legitimate practice through embodied performances. Symbolic capital, and consequently status, is only recognized as such by members of the community that share the same understanding of the embodied performances involved in acquiring it.

Accordingly, the ability to accrue status in the form of collectively recognized symbolic capital is a function of the shared understanding and interpretation of the regulative principles that govern social life in the community. However, in the CoD community equally viable, and at times conflicting, interpretations of status, hierarchy, and social mobility coexist among its membership. The absence of a collectively recognized source of regulative influence contributes the ambiguous social structure and suggests that consumers within the CoD community likely develop consensus on the legitimacy of symbolic capital through social processes for which exiting theory on legitimation does not yet account.

Social arrangements in the CoD Community

Although it is not uncommon for Call of Duty players to play online alone, they often organize into groups with varying degrees of sociality as they compete and socialize. Moreover, group formation in gaming communities is typically a homophilic process, where players who share similar lifestyle and/or demographic attributes, or those that share styles of play, form social clusters (Nardi and Harris 2006). In the context of CoD, these groupings range from highly organized, and typically long-term, collectives referred to as "clans," to far less formal social arrangements like "parties" and/or short-term collaborations with friends or strangers. The social arrangements produced in competition in the CoD online experience occur in three distinct grouping types common to online gaming communities (Nardi et al. 2007; Nardi and Harris 2006). Clans, parties, and short-term collaborations differ by group size, temporal continuity, division of labor, internal hierarchy, communication systems, social distance among members, etc. Essentially, the social arrangements present in the CoD community are patterns of social organization that have emerged to facilitate cooperative activity and more generalized social interactions among community members.

In the field of Call of Duty, the understandings that are shared in these social arrangements exert varying degrees of influence on players as they interact with one another. For CoD players, clans, parties, and collaborations play an important role in regulating social interactions in the community in the absence of more centralized sources of regulative legitimacy. In particular, the ongoing debate over the legitimacy of modified controller use highlights the complexity of these social arrangements and their roles in the CoD community. For instance, the normative role played by clans is aptly

illustrated in the following excerpt from an online discussion where players are discussing how to deal with mod users:

> Modded controllers, Boosting, or any other type of cheat needs to be cleaned out of our games. If my team, Team ICEE, catches anyone cheating this is what we do… I recommend going to Theater Mode and watching the video of the suspected person…then make a video clip… create a YouTube account, and link it with your Call of Duty profile…After you have uploaded the video, you can then link the video to @XboxSupport Twitter feed. Be sure to use the in-game tools for reporting, and also report them through their XBL Player Card… If we legit gamers do this process, then the cheat[er]s will soon go… (StealthXM15 - XboxLive.com forums)

StealthXM15's remarks reveal both the fairly limited role producers play in imposing their institutional authority to regulate activity in the field and the potential for social arrangements to act as resources to those interested in regulating play. Both the producers of the CoD franchise and the developers of the online platforms (e.g., Xbox) have the capacity to block suspected rule breakers from logging on to their respective servers. However, despite an explicit prohibition on modified controllers in various Terms of Service and Codes of Conduct, these firms presumably lack the ability or desire to directly monitor gameplay and enforce community rules consistently. Call of Duty players are ultimately left to devise methods to accurately self-report offenders. Here, StealthXM15 describes how his/her clan ("Team ICEE") goes about policing gameplay. He/she foregrounds the assertion that mod use is wrong and needs to be "cleaned out," and then goes on to provide a comprehensive set of step-by-step instructions and

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routinized procedures for gathering evidence against suspected modified controller users and reporting them to the games developers. The detailed nature of StealthXM15's description underscores the explicit set of shared understandings that have emerged among his/her clan members.

In the CoD field, clans are more organized than other hierarchical social groups comprised of likeminded players that play together in casual gameplay or compete together in professional tournaments. Clan members tend to share similar perspectives of legitimate community practices that are shaped by both interpretations of the ideals and standards present within the broader community and the set of shared values, interests, and gaming history that is unique to the clan itself. Accordingly, StealthXM15's adherence to the clan's ideals and interpretations of legitimate practice in the broader CoD community context (i.e., in a public forum) foreshadows the potential for the emergence of subculture. In many online gaming communities, social arrangements like the Team ICEE clan are sites that forge nascent cultural norms through social learning (Nardi and Harris 2005, p. 154-155; Nardi et al 2007). Alternatively, parties and short-term collaborations are informal and loosely organized groupings of players who engage in relatively casual relationships. These tend to be task-oriented social groups that form for a relatively short duration. While social norms and expectations may exist among party members and collaborators, they tend to be fleeting and less restrictive given the temporary and casual nature of these social arrangements.

It is also important to note that all of these social arrangements operate simultaneously as players play with and against one another; each exhibiting varying levels of influence on how social interactions play out and are interpreted. This further

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complicates the establishment of consensus on legitimate practice in the field. Just as Team ICEE takes an explicit stance against using modified controllers, other clans exhibit shared understandings that legitimize the practice. Such competing sentiments are echoed throughout the data, leading players to constantly call into question the legitimate or illegitimate status of the practice. For instance, lone community members, or those playing in temporary parties, will often find themselves competing against highly organized clans engaging in differing styles of play. This is often the source of uncertainty and tension. The ambiguity produced by such experiences is evinced in the emic observations of players. For example, one player, motivated by such an incident, began a chat thread to publically address the legitimacy of modified controllers stating that he/she "saw a clan who used rapid fire controllers. They said that it wasn't cheating because they modded them themselves and used their money. Your opinions on this, please? I say it is cheating…" (the dog, neoseeker.com forums). While this player argues that modified controller use is indeed cheating, his purported interaction with an opposing clan with conflicting beliefs causes him/her to question this disposition and seek validation from others in the community.

As CoD community members play and interact with one another online, they tend to weave in and out of these varied social arrangements; teaming up with friends or cooperative strangers, joining parties, and playing with clan members all within the same gaming session. Evidence from the data also suggests that players' interpretations of legitimate practice in the CoD community often vary as they move between the different social arrangements. Moreover, social norms and notions of legitimacy also tend to differ between social arrangements of the same type (e.g., from one clan to the next). The

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absence of a collectively recognized authoritative structure in the field of Call of Duty allows for a variety of interpretations of legitimate practice to be active all at once. For CoD players, perceptions of legitimacy for emergent practices are initially fluid, being shaped and reshaped by the ongoing social interactions and discursive activities in the field. In this constantly shifting normative environment the legitimacy of controversial practices like the use of modified controllers becomes both ambiguous and contested.

Liminality and the Impact of Structural Constraints in Virtual Space

CoD community as Liminal Space. The preceding evidence from the data highlight the dynamic and transitory environment in which discursive activities and social interactions are embedded within the CoD community. The meaning and social value of new objects and emergent practices in the field are typically clouded in ambiguity, uncertainty and a sense of ambivalence among players. This kind of experience is commonplace when novelties are introduced to CoD community members. This is illustrated in the following quote from an interview with Hillary (26yrs old – Bar Manager), a female gamer, who is attempting to express her initial thoughts on using modified controllers:

Hillary:	There's always going to be a way to cheat in every game. It's always going to happen. You just have to learn to deal with it. Yeah, I mean now I'll probably go actually look up what [modified controllers] are capable of doing. Yeah, like what

game play [is like] on modification. That's the thing is, I kind

of want to buy the Elite controller but then I kind of don't.

Interviewer: Why is that?

Hillary: I feel like it's kind of, I mean it's, I feel like it kind of is an

unfair advantage but then I feel like it's the future so, you kind

of have to.

Hillary's ambivalence and uncertainty are clear here has she quickly moves the

conversation from one about cheating, to one about being curious and "torn" about

whether to try using the "elite controller. She simultaneously expresses resistance to mod

use and recognition that these innovations represent a change in the field. Evidence of

such ambivalence was common throughout the data. Emic accounts from CoD players

would often underline internal conflict experienced by players in the community as they

continuously attempt to discern the legitimacy of a range of emergent practices in the

community that have the potential to be exploitative. While some of the debates within

the community over the legitimacy of practices are fleeting, Hillary's references to the

inevitability of cheating and modified controller use being "the future" of the community

subtly point to the potentially transformative nature of modified controller use as the

commonly held belief that allows the debate over the practice to persist. That is, the data

suggests that both proponents and opponents of modified controller use recognize the

potential for this practice to change the community in ways that will differentially impact

both their individual and collective interests. The ongoing nature of both the intrapersonal

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and interpersonal negotiations of meaning and legitimacy of modified controller use among CoD members reflects a community marked by unsettled times and underscores the contentious environment within the community as it approaches a state of social transition (Weinberger and Wallendorf 2012; Swidler 1986). Moreover, the ambiguity surrounding social structure and competing sources of normative influence stemming from the range of social arrangements operating in the community contribute to, and are themselves exacerbated by, the ongoing nature of the debate over modified controller use. Taken together, these conditions suggest that the contested nature of modified controller use at least in part produces a state of liminality in the CoD community .

The concept of liminality refers to a temporary in-between or transitional state. It was first introduced by anthropologist Arnold van Gennep ([1960]/2011), then further refined and popularized in the works of cultural anthropologist Victor Turner ([1964]1995, 1979). Traditionally, it has been conceptualized as a part of ritualistic processes of social change and was described as a transitional phase between stable states signified by conceptual, spatial and/or temporal boundaries. Within which conventional forms of meaning and significance are detached from individuals, groups and/or objects. In essence, liminality "denotes the social non-space in which transformation is experienced and achieved" (Skjoldager-Nielsen and Edelman 2014, p. 33; van Gennep [1960]/2011; Turner ([1964]1995, 1979). The emic experiences of consumers in the CoD community are littered with accounts of ambiguity about what constitutes legitimacy and narratives that foreshadow impending change in the community.

The sense of liminality in the CoD field is exacerbated by the relative absence of operating sources of authority in the community and the vague nature of the "rules" that

govern the field. The confusing nature of understanding legitimacy in the field is highlighted as community members frequently share conflicting information referencing interpretations from various sources. The vague and inconsistent nature of authority in the field is displayed by comparing the following accounts from two separate online forums where CoD players are given contradictory responses when inquiring about the legitimacy of modified controllers. In this excerpt from the callofduty.com community forum, a user explains that he/she is confused by the array of information and subtle signals in the field that controller modification may, or may not, be legitimate:

eXxcursioN: Ok I have a friend that makes these things but to me they are just different paint models to suit the users likes. I hear that modded controllers are illegal though? Plus, I have heard people arguing whether people are using modded controllers because of how they go straight to prone and do crazy dropshots ... Can someone clear this topic up for me because I also see a MLG controller on Amazon for £90 that is apparently able to make you move quicker using their analog sticks. Thanks.

extremefight49:   Modded controllers are not allowed in Black Ops II.

                          '[CoD-Black Ops II]: Security & Enforcement Policy:

                          Unsupported Peripheral Devices & Applications

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Any user who utilizes an unsupported external hardware device or application to interact with the game is subject to penalty. Unsupported peripheral devices and applications include but are not limited to modded controllers, IP flooders and lag switches.'

The forum user, eXxcursioN, points to conflicting evidence from the marketplace, his peers (the "friend who makes them"), and disputes between other players as sources of their confusion. This inquiry is immediately addressed by extremefight49, who suggests that controller modifications are universally disallowed in the community and supports this claim by directly referencing the Terms of Service provided by the game's producers. By contrast, the following exchange represents markedly different interpretation of legitimacy, as a CoD player who identifies as "starbuckfrack" describes a recent online interaction with an XBoxlive employee while inquiring the legitimate status of modified controllers:

starbuckfrack: Here's a quote from CHAT, note that this is an XBL [Xboxlive] Employee as opposed to chatting with an XBL Ambassador who doesn't work for MS.

'starbuckfrack: Need to know if using authorized/licensed rapid fire controllers on Xbox Live in online games are a violation.

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XBL Employee: Hi there, while they are not disallowed from being used. They are frowned upon by the gaming community as they give the player a non-standard advantage over other users

XBL Employee: In short, it's ok to use them'

Xbox Live, as noted elsewhere is an online game platform that officially prohibits the use of modified controllers. The Xbox Live employee in this instance seemingly gives a particular type of modified controller approval, while in other instances similar inquiries from the same community member garnered somewhat contradictory responses. Although many community members consider the use of modified controller to be a clear case of "cheating," the regulatory grey area leaves sizeable room for interpreting what is allowed and what authoritative body is responsible for regulating play. In a liminal state, the legitimacy of individuals, groups, objects and/or behavior is somewhat amorphous and circumstantial. Objects and practices are analogous to vessels that exhibit the potential to be transformed and ascribed a number of meanings as they transition towards a more stable state.

These two examples from the data exemplify commonly rehearsed contradictory discourse regarding the actual "rules" in regard to the legitimacy of a specific brand of modified controller. In essence, this field lacks a clear dominant collective frame, or shared understanding among members. Beyond the typical heterogeneity that exists in any field, the inconsistency between the regulatory guidelines from the game developers and the providers of the online gaming service have allowed a broad array of

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interpretations about whether modified controller use is "officially" allowed. Moreover, the fact that Microsoft has officially licensed modified (rapid fire) controllers on the market even further exacerbates confusion, despite the frequently ignored disclaimer that they are not intended for online use. Further, the actual banning of violators is a rare occurrence considering how pervasive the use of "banned" controllers has become. The end result for the community is the underlying realization that legitimacy is an internal community issue that must be resolved through self-regulation.

Notably, the ongoing contestation over the legitimacy of modified controllers, coupled with the relative absence of a dominant frame or effective regulative institutions, also reflect the community's inability to produce the forms of social capital necessary to facilitate community growth and sustainability in contrast to recent research (Thomas, Price, and Schau 2013). That is, players have not been able to establish stable and shared norms of social trust, norms of reciprocity and norms of community volunteerism, which have been shown to be requisite for the production of social capital in similar communities (e.g., Mathwick et al. 2008).

Structural Constraints in Virtual Space. The game programmers and development teams responsible for the Call of Duty video game franchise place emphasis on capturing the realism war and military-oriented combat in virtual space (Payne 2012). Accordingly, they design the game with certain limitations, boundaries, and conditions that place realistic constraints on in-game physics and combat-related interactions (e.g., variance in character movement, bullet trajectory, weapon damage, etc.) with the intention of creating a relatively level competitive environment. However, some of the gameplay features in CoD, inadvertently contribute to the emergence of illicit or controversial

practices as well as the prolonged nature of the contest over their legitimacy. One of

those game features is concept of "balance," which is a tacit structural constraint that

typically impacts collective understanding about which virtual objects are deemed

legitimate. In the CoD community, balance refers to the dispersion of efficacy among the

virtual objects available to players within the game. Here, the logic of balance is

somewhat akin to the childhood game of rock, paper scissors where each option presents

potential advantages and/disadvantages based on choices made by other players. The

degree of balance in a game incentivizes certain styles of play or the use of certain

objects and discourages others. Throughout the data, informants constantly assess the

relative effectiveness of virtual objects, and make direct comparisons regarding how

often, and under what circumstances, they achieve their intended purpose. Players are

particularly attentive to perceived weapon imbalances, as evinced by a player's reactions

to an article from pennyarcade.com covering the announcement that certain weapons

would be banned from use in an upcoming professional tournament. The following

excerpt from a comment thread following this article captures both the experiential

impact of playing an unbalanced game and the potential consequences of having to ban

overpowered weapons in professional tournaments:

> "CoD is unbalanced?! Who would've guessed?... I still wonder how long it takes
>
> before a game turns into Total Annihilation. That is, you ban nukes because the
>
> anti-nuke defense can be easily broken, and then you ban long range plasma
>
> cannons because they can be made to shoot across the entire map, and then when
>
> people are forced into the only strategy that remains due to your competitive bug-
>
> forced pruning, you wonder where all the fun has gone. If you never fix anything,

sometimes you're left with nothing after the bans." (Discrider – comment thread – pennyarcade.com article).

Here, this player mockingly questions the degree of balance present in the current iteration of CoD. The player then makes reference to *Total Annihilation*, another war-based strategy game familiar to those in the gaming community, whose tournament organizers are known to extensively restrict the use of in-game content. The player then describes the slippery slope that the *Call of Duty* community appears to be on with regard to weapons bans that severely constrain gameplay and ultimately diminish the overall experience. Gameplay in tournaments and professional competitions are highly-regulated and players can be sanctioned for using banned items; however, such oversight is not as prevalent in the everyday competitive interactions players typically encounter online. Consequently, players see the impact of imbalance within CoD games as particularly detrimental to competitive play in the tournament context. *Call of Duty's* producers are expected to provide virtual environments, content, and experiences that discourage the overuse of any one particular item and generally minimize the potential for abuse and exploitation of in-game content. Game developers intentionally vary the efficacy and utility of each virtual object according to object-type as well as certain combat and environmental circumstances.

In CoD games that are well-balanced, there are many objects that are relatively effective when utilized in the proper context or situation. Ideally, this encourages players to incorporate the full range of virtual objects into their competitive repertoires and adopt diverse styles of play. In CoD games that are not well-balanced there are particular weapons, attachments, and/or perks within the set that are consistently dominating or

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overpowered due to developer oversight or design flaw. When the set of virtual objects in an iteration of Call of Duty is imbalanced players are essentially forced to restrict their use of virtual objects to a fairly limited set of configurations.

Not surprisingly, evidence from the data suggests that instances of imbalance are common and generally met with a collective sense of dismay and disappointment, with calls throughout the community for developers to take corrective action. Ultimately, such design-based structural constraints make certain in-game content a necessity for the practice of playing Call of Duty, while simultaneously excluding other available virtual objects from consideration as a material resource. As such, when developers release an iteration of the CoD franchise that is perceived as unbalanced, players begin to converge on a select few virtual objects when playing the game. Evidence from the data suggests that in these conditions players often see modified controllers as a legitimate means of distinguishing themselves and gaining a necessary competitive advantage, given the perceived scarcity of viable options. In this sense, legitimacy is extended to this controversial practice as an unintended consequence of the development team's shortcomings.

The rise of modified controller use is a particularly common response to imbalance in game design and, as noted previously, has been the subject of enduring contestation in the CoD community. The remote nature of online competition renders it difficult to tell exactly who is using modified controllers at any given moment in community. The data are riddled with accounts of false claims and accusations during competitive interaction as well as in game play. The lack of visibility exacerbates the conflict by obscuring the ability to assess the true impact of modified controllers on

completion and the CoD community as a whole. The following excerpts highlight the divergence in disposition:

> Do something about MODIFIED CONTROLLER. I am sick to death with all these modified controllers, it's getting out of control. [In] about a third of lobbies I'm in, there is at least 1 player using a modified controller. Especially rapid fire and auto dropshot, they don't even try and hide the fact. In search and destroy 3 members of a clan were using it and even discussing the setting of the mods. Is anything being done about it? (SUPER_P00 - callofduty.com forum)

This comment exemplifies the disposition of those in the community who believe these controllers are unfair and think that they should be banned from use. Conversely, proponents of modified controllers, their use as a perfectly normal and legitimate strategic option that all members have a right to use as evident in the following excerpt:

> Seriously what's the big deal. You can say its advantage but [modified controller] use is no different than using turtle beach [brand headphones] which give you a huge advantage over players, without a headset. Anyone is capable of buying so you can't argue that." (End_is_Near – gamefaqs.com forums)

The second comment represents the discourse at the opposite extreme. It highlights some aspects of the overall disposition of CoD players that find the modified controller to be a useful strategy for competing and openly promote its use. The regularity of conflict in the data reinforces the notion that perceptions of legitimate practice in the community are in constant flux and only temporarily stable. This is similar to conditions found in other online gaming communities (Nardi et al 2007). However, in the CoD context contestation

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over what constitutes "fair play" appears to be especially vehement. This appears to be an unintended consequence of the structure of CoD online game play, where community members of varying levels of experience and disparate play styles are likely to have consistent interaction and communication in the same online "world."

Moreover, the server-based infrastructure that gaming producers rely upon to facilitate online gaming services places strict limitations on how players access these virtual worlds. Thus, players are essentially forced to play with whomever shares the server. As such, the field of Call of Duty resembles a closed system. In a virtual world where dissimilar consumers are forced to interact in a single "public sphere" physical, spatial, and/or conceptual boundaries are difficult to maintain (Karababa and Ger 2011). In such unsettled environments, modes of distinguishing oneself and expressing distinct consumption styles are often explicit in social interactions, as the social conditions that would typically allow for separation of conflicting practices (e.g., distinct isolated social spaces) are absent (Swidler 1986).

As such, from the emic perspective of CoD players, conflict seems in inevitable in this liminal field and what emerges is a multiplicity of alternative discourses on the role of modified controllers in the CoD community as shown in previously referenced examples from the data. As a consequence, the experience of playing CoD requires a continuous search for a social and moral order to serve as a resource for interpreting and understanding the online world inhabited by the CoD community. Under such conditions, the onus is on socialization to establish such an order by creating norms and shaping expectations of what constitutes legitimate practice. In the CoD community, the aforementioned social arrangements of clans, parties, and collaborations have become the

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sites of social learning and discursive activities that shape notions of legitimacy. However, given the semi-autonomous and diverse nature of these varied groupings, understandings of social norms and legitimate practice are somewhat fragmented and short-lived.

Mechanisms of Socialization.

Another aspect of social life in the CoD community that contributes to the fragmented nature of socialization are the diverse sources of information that players are exposed to in the field. Here, I use the term mechanisms of socialization to refer to the social and discursive features of the field that facilitate social learning and, to a limited extent, cultural production. Essentially, players are socialized in the following ways: 1. through observation of cooperative and/or competitive play; 2. by consulting the collective; and 3. through what players refer to as "flame wars," which typically involve varied forms of aggressively negative reinforcement through ridicule. Fundamentally, these mechanisms all operate simultaneously and they collectively represent the different ways in which people generally learn to play CoD "the right way." I now briefly describe these socialization mechanisms.

Observation of Cooperative/Competitive Play. Cooperative observation is a well-documented means of socialization across many domains of social life (Boyd and Richerson 1982). Players in the CoD community often describe how their friends, and/or other players that they finding themselves collaborating with, contribute to their understanding of how to play the game in both direct and, most times, implicit ways.

Accordingly, players also commonly watched video of others playing the game and tutorials online in order to gain better understanding of gameplay. In highly competitive context, like the COD community, many players would also spend large amounts of time attempting to learn from their competitors as evident in the following except from an interview with Max (29yrs old – Bar tender):

> I strongly believe you only get better by playing better [teams]. So I'll sit there and take a loss over and over and over, because I'm seeing how good these guys are…When you run into those parties that are badass, all of my friends are like… "oh no, quit…" And I like to sit there and play. If these guys are killing us, we need to be like them, let's do what they're doing, watch what they're doing… That's how you should play.

Here, Max demonstrates his willingness to sacrifice his opportunity to earn symbolic capital in the form of wins for the opportunity to learn new techniques. Max actively ignores the pleas of his friends in order to perhaps incorporate a new effective strategy into his CoD repertoire. Notably, he punctuates his statement with the implicit suggestion that this is the "right" or legitimate way to play, as opposed to only playing against weaker competition. This attitude was common among many hard-core players in the community. For players like Max, these activities are analogous to how professional athletes study game film on their opponents, both looking for weaknesses and absorbing new information that can be turned into competitive advantages.

Consulting the Collective. Ambiguity over which strategies constitute the "right" way of competing at CoD is constant throughout the data corpus. As in other forms of multiplayer online gaming, this ambiguity is typically resolved by consulting the

collective (Nardi et al 2007). In the following instance from the calloduty.com forums, a newer member of the community expresses interest in understanding the "appropriate" way to compete:

SitRepPro: Do people quickscope using modded controllers? I'm not overly bothered about quickscoping as a method being used against me but I see it's pretty prevalent in COD4, so do people use a modded controller to do it for them? Or have they been playing the game since launch so can do it manually? Is it against the rules to use a modded controller for this, and if not, where do people get them from? ... I've noticed some godly gamers who do quickscope so I was wondering if it's possible if I can be the same. I've picked off snipers using the M249 from longer distances than they pick off me so I don't think I'm too bad. Rather than get sore from the technique and bitch about it, why not see if I can do the same? I just don't know if it's supposedly against the rules so I don't want any resets. I got into COD rather late so excuse me if these are stupid questions!

D4nth3m4n: I think some people do use modded controllers for rapid fire on single fire weapons, for quick scoping where pulling the left trigger auto zooms in and shoots in one press and also drop shotting where when you left trigger you auto drop. However, there are also just fast trigger fingers, people who practice quick scoping and drop shotting so it's hard to know with the latter two.

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SirMaXx: Yeah there are a lot of annoying mods people use on controllers, I was pricing a custom controller case cover and buttons and saw the amount of stupid mods that there are out there for doing all those annoying tricks in one button press

Within the questions posed to would-be peers, SitRepPro provides a detailed description of how he has chosen to compete in the past, as well as the varied personal experiences and interactions that have resulted from his actions within the community. He lays out his strategies and objective goals (e.g., getting XP and kills), then compares this to other approaches to these ends, and seeks validation from other community members (e.g., "I don't think I'm too bad"). He also makes note of a specific strategy that he considers to be especially adroit, yet also exhibits ambiguity in accurately applying a social value to what he has witnessed others doing. He wants to know if "quickscoping" is a laudable skill acquired through experience and routine play or through other means that require less competence. He is careful to not explicitly disparage one source or the other, but seems to be more concerned with how quickly he can acquire this skill to aid in his pursuit of particular desired outcomes (i.e., higher rank). However, he places emphasis on doing it the "right way." Notably, SitRepPro's expressed interest in remaining within the bounds of the "rules" during his pursuit demonstrates a desire to maintain status, or a degree of respect from his peers, for his accomplishments. Above all, he appears interested in trying to gauge the degree of collective understanding over his options so that he can adjust his strategies accordingly.

Inquiries like SitRepPro's were common throughout the data and occur during online play, in physical conversation with other known players, or in popular internet-

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based community forums. Community members of varying levels of experience were constantly checking their performance against others. In this instance, the subsequent responses help to situate SitRepPro's experiences in a way that informs him (as well as others) as to what quickscoping technically entails and how possible it actually is to learn and repeat. He also does the same for "dropshooting," another popular strategy in game play. Moreover, D4nth3m4n's response alludes to a distinction in the social valuation of some strategies when compared to others. He makes reference to the fact that there are multiple approaches to engaging in these strategies with some requiring more effort than others, while SirMaXx was much more explicit in his response regarding the social valuation placed on modified controller use (the less valued strategy in his opinion). Another strategy commonly discussed in this manner is "camping," where players engage in a relatively passive form of combat remaining in a strategic position on the map and waiting for opposing players to come into range.

Flame Wars. Flame wars represent a broad array of ridiculing behaviors aimed at shaming, bullying, and coercing other players into adopting one's point of view. The following extended exchange between two CoD players highlight the prolonged nature of "flaming" members of the community, as two players argue over the legitimacy of modified controllers by drawing contrast to another controversial practice; camping:

> **Carmona25:** Using a modded controller online is worse than camping...and there is not much worse than camping. When I see a FAL fully automatic in a kill cam it makes me mad. The FAL is a single fire gun cause it's so strong.

Gackt: Complaining about camping is pretty lame...you must be one of those people who get mad if people dont play a game the way YOU think they should. And even if you did play the game the way your "victim" does, and you killed him, he'd still be pissed off and call you all kinds of names.

Carmona25: spoken like a true camper. I'm not gonna get into an off topic discussion with you.

Gackt: I suggest you find a different genre of game to play if camping makes you that upset.

Carmona25: Nah, If I spend $60 on a game I'm gonna play it whenever I feel like it. If I run into campers I'm gonna complain about them. Camping is the lowest of lows. I suggest you worry about the games you play buddy. Camping is a very weak play style.

Gackt: It sucks that Xbox live is full of people with your attitude. People don't play a game the way you want them to play it so you bitch and whine and cry. All you accomplish is making yourself look like a whiny little child...in the meantime the guy laying prone in a bush killing you when you run by every time is having fun.... how.... how dare he. Weak play style? Why because he's not running around trying to be all "elite" like you? It's a game.

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Carmona25: You're totally missing my point but whatever. Let's just agree to disagree...if you enjoy camping so be it.

Gackt: I don't camp very often; I actually prefer being more aggressive/offensive. You're right I must be missing your point...unless your point was to insult how people choose to play a game. And as for modded controllers...give me a break, idiots using rapid fire gain no advantage over anyone else. If the game was all single shot weapons and they were using something that lets them easily shoot faster than yeah...sure they get a 1up over everyone else... but that   is not the case... they die just as fast as anyone else. Modded controllers are far from the problem with games on live...people who mod the actual game are the problem, as well as developers who do not continue to support their game after it's been released. Aimbots and Wallhacks killed mw2....not the handful of people who spent money to fire a few weapons   faster then you.

Carmona25: ....camping shows ZERO SKILL.

Gackt: Yet it works well killing you so called "skilled" players. lol....keep whining though...it's entertaining.

Carmona25: Its entertaining how you keep trying to lure me into a flame war…I'm not sure what your deal with me is but drop it. 90% of gamers hate campers, why you have a soft spot for them is beyond me and I could care less. So keep trying troll, I'm not biting.

Consumers often engage in various forms of punishment and negative reinforcement in their interactions with other community members in order to promote the legitimacy and perceived normality of contested practices. On the surface, these two community members are debating the legitimacy of camping in relation to the use of modified controllers. Underlying this is an instance of socialization through ridicule. Socialization through ridicule refers to instances in consumer culture where members of a community or subculture attempt to shame, ostracize, haze, or admonish others who they perceive as violating consumption norms (Wooten 2006). Ridicule is an especially common socializing tool within communities like CoD. Here, Carmona25 keeps trying to leave the discussion while simultaneously trying to defend his/her position. Gackt appears to be trying to make an example out of Carmona25. Gackt laments that "Xbox live is full of people like Carmona25," who ultimately recognizes what is happening and directly addresses the fact that she/he will not be "lured" into the flame war. This type of socializing behavior is common in online interactions in forums and message boards as well as during online play in gaming lobbies and private parties. Community members would often insult and disparage each other's strategic choices in a manner that would cause others to reflect upon, monitor, and regulate their behavior.

Along with flaming as a discursive socializing activity, members of the community also use a variety of widely unpopular in-game behaviors and practices as a means of punishing those who violate community norms.

> **IDarK VorteXX:** Good, im sick and tired of playing people with modded controllers

DTH Brigade: LOL I just got suspended for a week because I was putting every obvious modded controller user's gamertag in my BIO... LOL; guess I'll just own them quietly without boasting about it. LOL ^_^... I still own every rapid fire users out there; I just piss them off with RPG's, and noobtubes ^_^

Thrall51906: that's fucking lame dude. learn to play the game like a normal person. you suck.

DTH Brigade: Guess Modding and Rapid Fire is normal to you?

Here, two community members express their dislike for modified controller use while one discusses their preferred tactics for dealing with suspected modders. The second player appears to take pride in having his account suspended for taking action against other members of the community engaging in unpopular behavior. Along with sharing innovative ways of exposing and reporting those suspected of modding, DTH Brigade also explains how he uses unpopular in-game weapons to level the playing field. As the conversation continues, another community member enters the discussion calling DTH Brigade's actions in to question. Thrall51906 uses abrasive language and suggests that retaliating against other community members in the manner described here also deviates from the "norm." Flaming often involves a combination of discursive and embodied activities all essentially aimed at harassing one's peers into sharing one's perspective or exiting the field. Often several players share similar points of view will band together and target individuals who express opposing ideals.

The back-and-forth and deliberately punitive nature of flame wars and "flaming" activity represent a rather overt dialectic process in which social learning and

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socialization occur through a disparaging form of the negotiation of meaning and legitimacy. Flame wars are a particularly manifest form of the dialectic processes in the marketplace in that the goal of such activity does not appear to be solely about achieving synthesis, or reaching some form of consensus. The purpose is to defeat the opposing point of view. What is unique about flame wars, is that the negotiation of meaning takes place between distinct sets of consumers purporting to be members of the same community. This represents a notable departure from previous accounts of the dialectic process in the literature that tend to highlight the negotiation of meaning between collectives of consumers and producers, or other marketplace institutions at broader societal levels (e.g., Holt 2002; Giesler 2008, 2012). On the surface the goal of such behavior appears to be to ostracize and humiliate those who do not adhere to perceived norms and expectations within the field. Beneath the surface, this behavior is also intended to more subtly demonstrate to onlookers that certain behaviors, activities, and ideas do not have a place in the community. Thus, flame wars serve manifest and latent functions. They are a learning tool for those who participate in them as well as spectators within the community. In this way, flame wars are also akin to frame alignment practices (e.g., Thomas, Price and Schau 2013). However, given that the CoD community lacks a "master frame" or singular dominant logic, flame wars are short-lived, and highly contextual. They exhibit limited influence on aligning actual behavior in a consistent way.

Collectively, mechanisms of socialization do tend to give some momentary efficacy to notions of legitimacy. As noted, social life and socialization take place in and across various types of social arrangements that have come to exist in the field. In sum,

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the preceding discussion highlights conditions that influence the way consumers experience social structure in the CoD community. I highlight how these conditions produce liminal space and how various mechanisms of socialization have emerged in this space to orchestrate behavior. Most notably this discussion suggests that the negotiation of meaning and legitimacy surrounding contested practices play an important role in shaping notions social life in the community. The absence of a collectively recognized regulative body capable of resolving community tensions revolving around the use modified controllers, coupled with the aforementioned structural conditions are the primary factors that contribute to the emergence of oppositional discourses regarding the legitimacy. While this analysis and interpretation of the data suggests that practices can play an important role in how multiple discourses to come to fruition in the CoD community, it does not offer a detailed theoretical explanation as to how different discourses of legitimacy come to be associated with contested practices. Moreover, one of the stated goals of this research is to generate insight as to how any one discourse regarding the legitimacy of a contested practice comes to be perceived as the dominant voice within the community. Community practices are complex social constructions and the varied elements that comprise them both shape, and are shaped by the context in which they operate (Schau et al 2009). In order to adequately address theoretical questions related to legitimation processes and the emergence of shared understanding within consumption communities, more in-depth analytical attention should be given to how consumers socially construct contested practices.

CHAPTER 6

CONTESTED ELEMENTS OF PRACTICE AND FRAME

FORMATION

In this section of the dissertation I unpack the social construction of a contested practice. Essentially, I use an adapted version of the elements of practice framework (Figure 6.1) to show how the two oppositional perspectives on modified controller use emerge simultaneously as consumers negotiate their meaning and legitimacy in the CoD online community. The performance of a practice can be thought of as a particular way of understanding, behaving, emoting, and interacting with objects and others within a given social domain (Warde 2005). Ideally, a practice involves the skillful coordination of mind, body, and objects in accordance with a particular understanding of the discourses, structures, and discursive processes that govern a particular context (Reckwitz 2002, 250). Understanding how these elements of practice interact and are socially constructed would generate insight into the discursive process of legitimation within consumption communities.

In explicating the social construction of contested practice I make use of the conceptual distinction between integrative practice and dispersed practices. From a Practice Theory perspective, integrative practices, like hunting, cooking, or driving, are
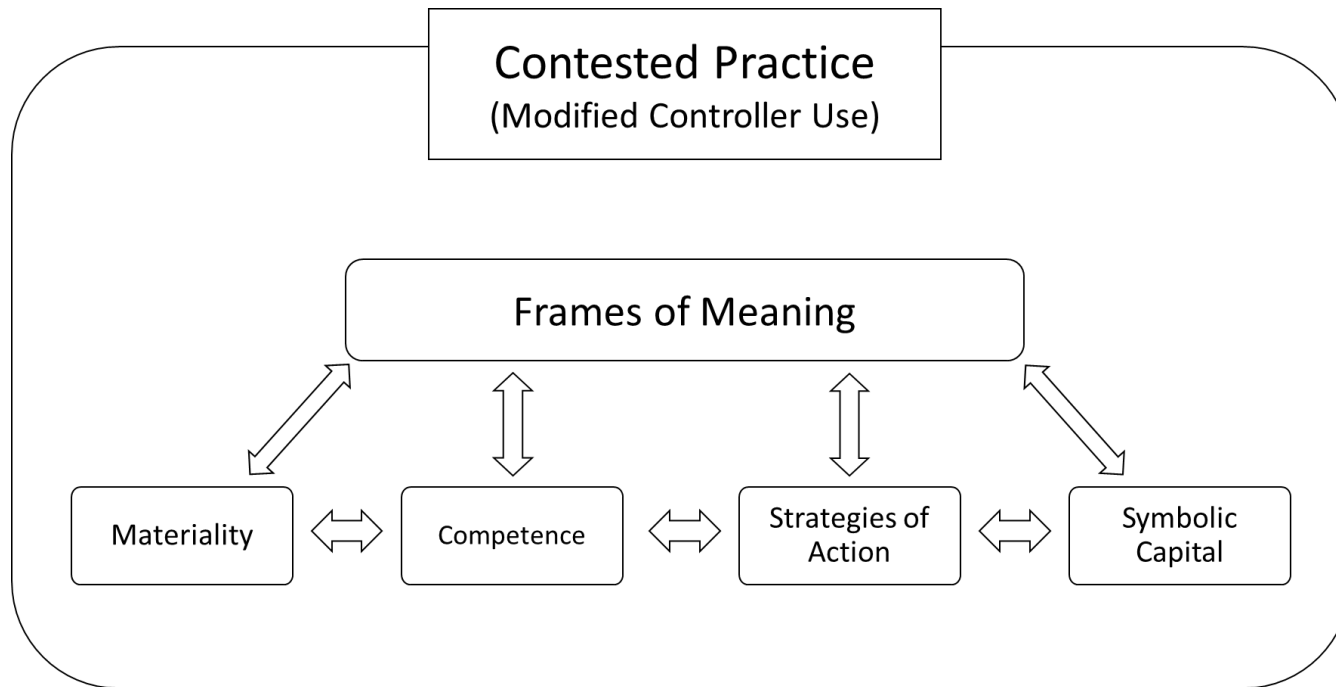
Figure 6.1 Elements of Practice Framework

overarching complex sets of routines, behaviors, and actions that comprise specific social domains (Warde 2005; Schatzki 1996). Integrative practices are what organize and collectively define the range of activities that constitute consumption communities (Arsel and Bean 2013). That is, they provide the discursive logic that coordinates and gives meaning to dispersed practices - the range of otherwise unrelated routine actions, materials, and competencies that operate together in the performance of a specific integrated practice.

To this end, my analytical focus is hierarchical in nature. The overarching integrative practice that serves as the definitive entity for this community is the practice of playing Call of Duty. It refers to the broad range of dispersed practices associated with engaging in online play that together comprise the unique experience that defines the CoD community. I conceptualize modified controller use as one of a number of dispersed practices that have emerged within the CoD community. In order to analyze modified controller use as a dispersed practice that is contested in the community it must be understood as embedded within the integrative practice of playing CoD. Thus, I explore how notions of materiality, forms of cultural knowledge, and meaning are ascribed to modified controller use in the integrative practice of playing Call of Duty competitively. Although elements of the practice of playing CoD may be similar to those used in other games, it is recognizably distinct in that it requires a unique configuration of dispersed practices and associated elements of practices that have unique meaning in this context.

As noted throughout, what emerges from the data are two ideal types of CoD players that perceive the legitimacy of modified controller use in opposing ways. "Purists" stress the importance of fair play, honor, and the strategic use of in-game

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content, and they frame modified controller use as "cheating." "Modders" emphasize the accrual of field-specific capital, strategic use of the most efficient means to desired ends, and they frame modified controller use as a "necessary tool of the trade." These ideal gamer types represent two competing yet interdependent perspectives on modified controller use as a dispersed practice widely shared in the community; with each variant vying for cultural legitimacy in that social space.

In order to unpack the social construction of this contested practice for each ideal type I take methodological cues from both sociological and marketing theory to employ an explicit application of practice theory, as based primarily on the work of Alan Warde (2005) and Theodore Schatzki (1996). The construction of ideal types like those I propose here is embedded within a variant of the elements of practice theoretical framework. In this section I add conceptual clarity and advance the analytical utility of the framework by reconciling conceptual differences between its various elements. I then use this adapted framework to analyze the social construction of modified controller use, a contested dispersed practice.

The dispersed activities that constitute the practice of playing CoD are comprised of several interdependent elements. These include players' perceptions of: objects and resources; what constitutes legitimate competencies in playing behavior and the construction of strategy; and the basis of symbolic capital and meaning in the community. I use this framework as a tool to highlight the critical distinctions in how both modders and purists construct the practice of modified controller use.

Materiality in the CoD Community: The Mod as a Contested Object.

From a practice theory perspective, materiality refers to the requisite objects and resources necessary to perform playing CoD while "objects" is an all-encompassing categorization, denoting the set of context-relevant physical phenomena that play some role in the performance of a given practice. Access to objects (e.g., infrastructure, tools, hardware), the materials that comprise them, and even particular elements of the human body itself are seen as essential to the act of carrying out practice-related routines and activities (Arsel and Bean 2013; Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012; Magaudda 2011; Schau et al 2009; Shove and Pantzar 2005; Reckwitz 2002; Schatzki 1996).

Consumers in the CoD community are constantly investing in an array of objects associated with gaming in general and specifically linked to playing CoD. In the following excerpt from an interview, Jeremy (26yrs-old, ex-military/stay-at-home father) has been asked to elaborate on the range of items he has designated as "gamer gear."

> I have a vent hood cover [for the Xbox console], and an external fan as well, which is super nice. It's super quiet, and it draws out [the dust]… [the fan] makes it look kind of almost like a hotrod hood cover. Kind of looks like that… And then I have a Seagate 2 ½ terabyte external hard drive for it too… yeah, gear is definitely a big thing, especially the [Microsoft] Elite controller. I don't have it. Only because it's $150 and I just spent $315 on a headset. So that stuff is gamer gear to me…That and something simple to snack on, something that's not going to make your fingers dirty or greasy, preferably something that's not like crazy loud, too. So, I mean, we had Doritos actually for a little bit there. They had like

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these gamer packs, which the side of the bag opened up. It was a square bag

instead of a rectangle, so it was thicker too, and it was more like a box, and it

opened, re-sealable, flat. And I was like [wow!]. [*laughter*]. (Jeremy)

Jeremy describes the accumulation of gaming-related objects as an ongoing process. He

makes reference to objects that he already possesses, as well as objects which he plans to

obtain. As with members of other consumption practice-oriented communities, the

practices of gaming, and specifically playing CoD, orchestrate the arrangement of these

items and drive this accumulation process (Arsel and Bean 2013). "Gamer gear"

generally refers to the set of legitimate, or non-controversial, items and resources that are

collectively understood by members of the community to be routine parts of the gaming

experience. It includes particular arrangements of branded items, such as gaming chairs,

low-latency gaming monitors, specialized headsets and controllers that are commonly

employed in the practice of playing CoD. Additionally, food items such as highly-

caffeinated sodas, energy drinks, and snack foods are ergonomically packaged and often

identified as "gamer fuel" by those embedded within the gaming culture. From an emic

perspective, this broad category of branded material resources that is intentionally

marketed as gaming-oriented products represent some of the most salient objects related

to playing CoD and are readily incorporated into practices as players enact their identities

as gamers and CoD players.

A unique feature of online gaming practices is that they often necessitate a

continuous interplay between both the tangible materials and products that facilitate

gameplay and the virtual content available within the game itself. As a war-based video

game, CoD requires players to become familiarized with the wide range of combat-

themed in-game content in order to play effectively. From the player's perspective, the wide variety of combat-related objects available within the game is one of CoD's most attractive features. The diverse nature of the virtual content available to facilitate the practice of playing CoD is exemplified in the following online posting from a CoD-related thread on the Xboxachievements.com forums, a site where players are actively sharing information about object use within the game.

> "Normally I use *sleight of hand pro*, *cold-blooded pro*, and either *sit rep pro* or *ninja pro* depending on the map with a silenced *vector*, *c-4*, and an *RPG*. I use the silencer to keep other people in game from figuring out where the boosting hot spots are so I can keep the kills to myself. If I need an extended mag challenge for a sniper, or any other weapon, I simply use *sitrep* and put *FMJ* with *stopping power* on the weapon, and occasionally a *thermal* as well if the map is large enough." (All to Atrophy – Xboxachievements.com Forum)

This player's description of both their normal and situational arrangements of in-game content provides a glimpse into the vast array of virtual content made available to players as a standard part of each CoD game. This particular player specifies choice of weapons (i.e., the vector sub-machine gun with a silencer, C-4 plastic explosives, etc.) and also makes mention of items like "sleight of hand pro" and "cold-blooded pro," which reference a set of special abilities items or "perks" that enhance player's capabilities in combat or alter the effectiveness of their weapons. Players also have access to virtual objects used to personalize their characters and weapons. From the perspective of community members, understanding the costs and benefits related to the use of combat-

related objects as well as grasping how their individual attributes interact with one another are some of the most important aspects of playing CoD.

Members of the CoD community do not consider all virtual content to be relevant material resources for playing. Although players have a certain degree of autonomy in how they select and deploy objects in-game, the use and availability of virtual content is somewhat constrained by structural features designed into each *CoD* game. Players are limited in their capacity to equip and deploy virtual items and must make trade-offs between weapons, attachments, and perks as they play. For example, players have limits on how many weapons they can carry, and each weapon has a limited number of attachments that may be equipped. Moreover, some virtual items are available immediately within the game while other items must be earned by achieving specific in-game goals. Still, others are made available for purchase by the game's developers. These more exclusive items range from aesthetic to powerful weapons and perks. Because players are not allowed to trade virtual content directly, access to the most exclusive in-game content is only attainable through personal achievement or purchase. In fact, some players who have attained such content or earned high rankings will make their personal accounts available for sale or trade.

The incorporation of everyday objects, those produced for some purpose unrelated to gaming, into gameplay is also commonplace within the CoD community. Members of the community often make creative use of a variety of objects that may supplement or enhance the functionality of branded gamer gear, or that directly facilitate game play. As Jeremy continues the discussion of "gamer gear," he explains how other ostensibly unrelated objects have come to be repurposed in relation to gaming and

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playing CoD. He describes the process of setting up a space in his home for gaming and maintaining his equipment:

> So I [threw up] my TV, I just had like two old speakers, two big old speakers from my old sound system, my TV rests on that, I have a tough box from my deployment to Iraq that I have my gaming console set up on. You know, just a night table next to it for, you know, setting random junk on and everything and…an office chair, you know, something I bought. [It's] an office chair from Office Max for 24 hours of sitting. You know, because I knew that at some point or another I'd be sitting there for at least 12 hours…Gear is definitely a big thing, man. If you've got a crumby controller in terms of filthy, like you just don't take care of it, I mean that's going effect your play…So it's definitely [important], and I usually clean mine about once a week, and I actually have a clay like…kit that's made for cutting and doing all kinds of things with clay…Well, so it came with all these little brushes and all this kind of like dental tools, almost, so it's like super, super great for cleaning the Xbox controllers. (Jeremy)

Jeremy's emphasis is on his ability to appropriate objects from a range of social domains and find ways to make them useful in his role as a "gamer." He excitedly highlights both the gaming-related function of each object as well as the dual and/or former role that each has or had in other aspects of his life. The tough box from his military deployment has newfound utility as the designated stand for his gaming consoles. His speakers now situate his television at the appropriate height for gaming and are no longer for enjoying music. As the discussion continued, Jeremy also explained that he originally purchased the clay kit to aid in creating holiday decorations with his daughter. Objects from his role

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as a father and his former role as military personnel now simultaneously facilitate gameplay. The specific composition, arrangement, and use of objects often varies on an individual basis, and CoD players generally recognize and accept that many members of the community "borrow" and incorporate objects from other domains and from their other social roles and identities. Additionally, objects like nightstands and office chairs that occupy somewhat mundane roles in other social domains, may come to be included in the set of field-specific material resources. Linkages between certain objects and a practice may emerge from their codependence with other objects or elements of practice in bringing an integrative practice to fruition, or merely from their routine presence as a practice is being performed (Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012).

Call of Duty gamers also use personal items and other external resources to directly supplement and modify other gaming-specific objects. Notably, game and console developers strictly prohibit the modification of gaming equipment and accessories; however, as noted, these restrictions have historically been difficult to enforce. Moreover, while online gaming is an inherently social endeavor, many of the physical activities related to gaming typically take place in relatively private spaces. Given this, CoD players generally experience little restriction on the objects they involve in performing gaming related tasks; making the use of external material resources all the more probable. Thus, experimentation and bricolage are commonplace among gamers and, as in other consumption spaces, this innovative aspect of object use within the CoD consumer culture is experienced as an emancipatory enactment of their gamer identities (Holt 2002). Although largely reliant on firms and producers to develop products that have designated functions in gaming, gamers relish the notion of integrating gaming

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products with their own personal items. CoD players are constantly looking for clever ways to personalize their gameplay experience using external resources. And though this is not inevitable, as many of these objects become more integrated into the routine performance of tasks and activities—like speakers that now serve exclusively as stand for a gaming console—they become implicitly understood to be gamer gear.

As with most practices, notions of efficacy and functionality are the driving forces behind the emergence of routine associations between objects and performance (Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012). Indeed, for most gamers the legitimacy of any object, either tangible or virtual, is largely based on its effectiveness in bringing about optimal performance in online competition. In the following instance from the data, Jeremy describes why a particular brand of energy drink has become important parts of his routine:

> NOS and energy drinks, for me that would be gamer gear…You can drink a Red Bull and feel awake and stuff like that and you can function for a couple of more hours before you crash, right? … I mean I drink [a NOS] and a couple of minutes later and I just feel like my eyes are more acute, like…They don't burn as much if I'm gaming, even if I'm not blinking as much as I'm supposed to, which happens often. But I feel like my responsiveness is a little bit faster, so there's something about the mixture of NOS itself that helps me [be] a better gamer. You know, so even if I'm not tired, and I don't need an energy drink ... But the moment I get on the game, I might pop a NOS because it's going to elevate my gaming that much more. Which in first person shooters, multiple player online, is a necessary thing

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to have. Some focus, you know. [I've never had crack or anything], but I'm

guessing it's like a toned version of crack.

Jeremy is explicitly attentive to how well the NOS brand energy drink aids in his

competitive performance, listing in detail the ways it improves his functionality. NOS

energy drink has become so much a part of Jeremy's routine that he uses it even when he

is not physically tired in order to ensure optimal performance. He also anchors his

evaluation of NOS's efficacy on similar products (i.e., Red Bull energy drink) and draws

distinction based on the ability to prolong effective play. Players use similar evaluative

techniques to discern the viability of objects related to playing CoD. Competitive social

interaction is the organizing principle by which most objects are appropriated as branded

commodities, virtual content, and some existing possessions are acquired, repurposed, or,

at times, created to facilitate activities related to playing CoD. The notions of efficacy

and functionality tend to foster the inclusion of items into the set of legitimate CoD

objects and give objects meaning.

The "Mod" as a Contested Object. Overall, the notion of materiality in the CoD

community is dynamic in nature. Members are constantly engaged in the process of

identifying, evaluating, and debating the legitimacy of objects used in the facilitative

tasks and activities related to playing CoD in an attempt to definitively narrow the range

of objects that belong in the field. As such, the routine usage of certain objects has served

as an ongoing point of contention within the community. Controllers are often a popular

target for experimentation and user-modification within gaming culture; as they are the

primary input device by which gamers interact with one another and the virtual

environments. As noted elsewhere, in the CoD community modified controller use is one

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of many dispersed practices that facilitates the integrative practice of playing CoD. The emergence of modified controllers as objects within the community and the proliferation of their use represents a particularly salient tension among members of the community.

Community members categorize controller modifications into one of three classes (1) aesthetic customizations, including color schemes and options that are not available on officially licensed versions; (2) controllers with a modified interface (i.e., extra buttons) that allow players more versatility and command; and (3) controllers with additional software and/or "rapid fire" capabilities that generally automate some of the most difficult strategies used in competition (e.g., auto-aim, auto-dropshot, auto-quickscope, etc.). Some modifications are done in-home by relatively tech savvy consumers, while others are bought pre-assembled by third party companies that specialize in serving this growing market.

Aesthetic modifications are generally accepted by community members as a whole, but controllers with a modified interface or additional software/rapid fire capability represent an ongoing point of contention among members of the community. As noted, purists suggest that such modified controllers have no place in online gameplay within the CoD Community. For them, the use, growing presence, and diversification of modified controllers are associated with unethical and immoral behavior (i.e., "cheating"). These themes are evident in the following excerpt from an online thread in the callofduty.com forums, where a player made the following remarks in response to another player arguing for the legitimacy of modified controllers:

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So, for those keeping score he admits quite openly to network manipulation... but if you ask him he just says you can't tell me how to use to my internet... And to which no [one] can but he purposely admits to turn everything he can on BEFORE he plays mw3 in an attempt to "alter" his upload download ping so he gets favorable help from the lag system on mw3... also he openly admits to pirating software. but don't ask him he will just say downloading torrents is "normal household usage" I guess that the new slang for piracy... cause last time I checked the overwhelming majority of all torrents are for pirated materials, i.e., music movies, games. *And now he wants modded controllers.* Bravo man you [are] one fine piece of work a pillar of honesty and integrity...lol. At this point I would think most politicians have more integrity than this guy...play right, play fair, play straight up. (Scarebearr – callofduty.com forum)

Scarebearr embeds the modified controller within a network of illicit objects and resources associated with disreputable behaviors that are well-known within the gaming subculture (e.g., network manipulation) and in society at large (e.g., the acquisition or distribution of stolen/pirated material). Purists find objects like modified controllers to be primarily disruptive. They grant users an unfair advantage in an otherwise fair competition. For Scarebearr, the notion that modified controllers deserve legitimacy only serves to punctuate a larger set of unethical behaviors and object usages.

For purists, the presence of the modified controller in online competition violates their tacit understanding of what kind of objects and material resources belong in the field. Modified controller use is viewed as illegitimate because of its potential to impact competitive outcomes.

I just think it's sad folks feel it necessary to use turbo controllers over Live for an advantage. In offline campaign who cares but over Live? That's lame. If it's not built into the game you shouldn't be doing it. They include all those perks and class customization in Multi-Player modes for a reason. Find a setup that works for you and go to town rather than dropping $200 or whatnot on a 3rd party modded setup. Frak man, that money can buy a lot of beer!! (Opiate42 – xbox360achievements.com – forums)

Purists like Opiate42 view the controller solely as a medium for the enactment of a practice. All else being equal, it should not affect the performance of practice. Thus, modified controllers have no legitimate role in competitive play. This player highlights the availability of "legitimate" material resources, and makes reference to what he/she feels is an excessive cost, as fundamental rationales for eschewing modified controllers. He/she contrasts their use with the wide range of virtual objects already designed into the game, which should suffice for customizing one's experience. He/she directly questions the necessity for additional modification as it dilutes the nature of the collective competitive identity on which gaming culture is dependent. Opiate42 also makes a subtle distinction between offline and online modified controller use; underlining the potential impact mods may have in online competitive play. Purists adhere to the notion that the presence of game-related objects and material resources should not impact one's ability to perform.

By contrast, modders make assessments of the legitimacy of objects primarily based on notions of utilitarian need. These players tend to see the "mod" as a tool of the trade, a requisite piece of equipment that improves efficacy and functionality. This

sentiment is evinced in the following quotes taken from two separate online discussions where modders sought to justify the object's use:

> @Everyone saying they should ban the controller mods: The controller mods obviously make the game better, by giving the players more control over their character. If all the players agree to using them, why not allow them? Everyone wins. Should arcade sticks be banned in fighting games because they work better than controllers? Should gaming mice be banned in PC games because they work better? (Kered13 – comment thread -pennyarcade.com article)

> I'm not justifying "cheating", I'm debating whether this *IS* actually cheating… I do not believe it is cheating. It's a hardware option that you are depriving yourself of. (rock.theory - callofduty.com – forum)

Kered13 defends modified controllers by comparing them to similar gaming advancements that are deemed legitimate in other genres, even going so far as to suggest that they "make the game better." For modders, universal adoption would be the ideal resolution to the extant tensions within the CoD community. They perceive modified controllers as standard equipment for "serious" CoD players. Therefore, they place the onus on purists for not taking advantage of welcome technological improvements to objects that are necessary in the performance of the community defining practice; competitive online play. Rock.Theory also captures the sentiment of personal accountability as he/she defends the use of modified controller against accusations of cheating. It is the responsibility of each individual community member to recognize the

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benefits of modified controllers and not "deprive" themselves of the materials necessary to effectively compete. He/she continues:

> KEEP IN MIND, I'm not talking about MODIFYING THE GAME (i.e. SOFTWARE). I'm talking about MODIFYING THE CONTROLLER INPUT. Modifying the GAME CODE is for sure against the [CoD Terms of Service], but my XBOX and my controllers are MY HARDWARE that I can do what I please with it. MY HARDWARE. If there are any limits to what can and cannot be done in the game, they should be set by [tell us who IW is] so that external modifications have little to no effect.…I shouldn't have to worry about what hardware I use or how I use my hardware because they suck as programmers…If you can say, "You can get banned for using an auto/rapid fire controller" by that logic you can say, "You can get banned for choosing a crappy [internet service provider]." You can choose a controller, [and] you can choose an ISP. Both are hardware services that you choose to use and both do affect the gameplay. If I'm smarter than my opponents and I'm not editing any software, then what's the problem?" (rock.theory – callofduty.com – forum)

The preceding quote echoes the mindset of many in the community who see themselves as only the cleverest of bricoleurs, not limiting their use of material resources to what is immediately available in the marketplace (i.e., branded objects and accessories) or to what developers have placed in the game. This notion was particularly true before modified controllers were mass marketed by third party companies. Initially, mods were only accessible to players that had the technical savvy to disassemble a controller and configure the modifications themselves or had access to individuals who possess these

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skills. Moreover, modders like rock.theory perceive modification of the controller as an entitlement, describing his/her decision to make modifications as somewhat of a natural right. For them, this particular conceptualization of ownership and personal property often extends to any aspect related to CoD in which Players engage in the exchange of resources. Notably, this player also makes the distinction between manipulation of software (which is acknowledged as disreputable behavior) and the modification of hardware. In doing so, rock.theory suggests that he/she know the difference between right and wrong; positioning the use of modified controllers as falling well within the bounds of legitimate material resources. He/she also argues that if developers wanted to limit or restrict modifications they would do so, and goes on to suggest that playing with a standard controller is analogous to playing with substandard equipment.

This collection of ideas is common among modders, and they jointly (with purists) denote the ways in which these members of the CoD community rationalize the presence and acceptance of this new object. From a practice theory perspective, the simultaneous acceptance and rejection of the modified controller as a legitimate cultural object represents adversarial interpretations of objectified cultural capital (Holt 1998; Bourdieu 1984). This typically signifies the emergence of a related yet distinct derivation of an existing practice, but may also highlight the presence of a more "predatory" relationship between two competing practices operating in the same field (Pantzar and Sundell-Nieman 2003). In the case of modified controllers in the CoD community, the latter appears to be the more likely scenario.

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The performance of a practice requires the existence of certain skills, shared understandings, and practical knowledge. Moreover, the performance of community-specific practices often requires distinct forms of knowledge and learned capabilities that diverge from routines that are commonly found in broader society (Warde 2005). From an elements of practice standpoint, the skills, practical understandings, and procedural knowledge necessary to perform a practice have often been conceptually identified as sets of competencies, or "ways of doing." The term 'competencies' generally encompasses all relevant forms of practical knowledge and physical capability that have become associated with using objects in an adroit manner in the act of performing a given practice (Arsel and Bean 2013; Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012; Shove and Pantzar 2007). In sum, these are embodied skills that are performed in conjunction with objects.

CoD players acquire a number of skills through their experiences playing the game and interacting with other members of the community. As players get better at aiming weapons, or maneuvering through virtual terrains, and develop proficiencies that become forms of culturally-specific knowledge, unique to CoD field. The aggregation of such acquired skills and techniques is in many ways tantamount to one's overall competency in playing CoD. In conceptualizing playing CoD competitively as an integrative practice, the skills, habits, and styles that emerge as players encounter and learn to use the different types of objects and material resources in the field can be understood as dispersed practices that collectively embody the performance of playing CoD (Arsel and Bean 2013; Schatzki 1996).

Over time, players have also developed a range of complex skills and procedural understandings that are specifically organized around the integrative practice of playing CoD. The following excerpt from a thread on the callofduty.com community forums highlights the situational knowledge and technical skill required to execute one of the more widely recognized competencies that has emerged in the CoD community – the "drop shot:" It is an evasive technique that involves firing a weapon at an opponent while simultaneously diving to the ground (i.e., going "prone") in an attempt to avoid or mitigate any potential damage from returned fire.

> As for the drop-shots, I have an issue where I click the right stick a little too hard when I tense up in a situation (like shooting at someone). If I use the default stick layout, I end up knifing at people from across the map. This causes me to look stupid, to have a delay before I can shoot, and usually ends up in [my] death. Thus, I switch my controller layout so that clicking the right stick controls the squatting/prone and the B button now controls the knife. By doing so, you create the "drop shot"… When I go to shoot someone I will end up squatting down or going prone…it does help prevent you from getting shot (sometimes), doesn't look as stupid, and also gets rid of the delay in shooting that I have when using the knife. For me it is a no brainer. (LifeSong1 – callofduty.com forums)

CoD players place a premium on the development of complex physical and cognitive skills devised to capitalize on certain aspects the game's physical and virtual mechanics and exploit its limitations. Consequently, players develop competencies in techniques like drop-shooting, jumping and shooting simultaneously, or "no-scoping" which involves firing long-range weapons quickly and accurately without fully aiming or using the

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weapons' sights (also referred to as "quick-scoping"). Players are constantly seeking out and sharing knowledge about the most effective ways to do things like aim weapons, use material resources, and move about their virtual environments. Here this player shares his/her rationale for the relying on the drop-shot technique, noting both the potential problems it alleviates, as well as the perceived benefits experienced if performed properly. This player also describes how this skill can be facilitated by using one of the games alternate options for assigning command inputs on the controller. The cultivation of competency for techniques like drop-shooting within the CoD community is largely an endogenous social process. These techniques were not a part of the game's initial design and CoD's producers do not formally offer any form of instruction or tutorial that would facilitate the development or diffusion of such skills.

While many kinds of skills and understandings have emerged within the CoD community, those that become collectively understood as requisite for the performance of playing CoD must ultimately become routinized (Arsel and Bean 2013). Activities like drop-shooting and no-scoping have been subject to routinization. The results are evident in this excerpt from a callofduty.com forum where two players discuss the routinization of drop-shooting:

> half-megatron: I have seen a lot [of dropshooters], they dropshot regardless of the situation....who drop shots to shoot someone in the back?

> KKMarino: I have been a drop shotter since it was inducted. It is a habit now. I always push the thumbstick down when I shoot. You get so good at it that you

can fall to the ground. Just like no-scoping… People run around with sniper like

they are SMG's [sub-machine guns]…

Routinization produces a common understanding of these embodied activities as

naturalized behaviors and occurrences for many practitioners. Half-megatron describes

what she/he believe to be the superfluous act of using an evasive technique like drop-

shooting to kill an opponent who is unaware of a threat. KKMarino follows with an

explanation emphasizing the reflexive nature of this technique for those who have

developed a high level of competency. For him or her, techniques like drop-shooting and

no-scoping have become somewhat habitual in nature. Competency in these skills is

developed through repetition in various social interactions between members of the

community (e.g., playing online, discussions about technique, and so forth). Moreover,

the development of competency in such techniques allows him/her to effectively use

materials in alternative ways (e.g., using long-range sniper rifles in close combat

situations). In practice-oriented consumption communities, forms of competency tend to

emerge as certain ways of thinking, bodily activities, and usages of material resources

coalesce into collectively recognized routines, procedures, and techniques (Warde 2005;

Mathwick, Wiertz, and Ruyter 2008). These routines are continuously shaped and

reproduced by those who actively engage in the practice. Understanding how to perform

the tasks becomes shared cultural knowledge. Complex techniques like "drop-shooting"

and "no-scoping" come to be seen as norms and/or conventions by practitioners.

The preceding exchange also subtly underlines the notion that there are instances

or situations where the use of some of the game's more complex techniques is considered

inappropriate. Along with cultivating and routinizing highly complex ways of using

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objects, players in CoD have also developed distinct styles of playing the game in which their various competencies are uniquely deployed. In the following excerpt from an interview with a CoD player named Todd (30yrs old - College instructor/Game designer) he attempts to summarize the different styles of play:

Interviewer: If you had to put people into buckets as far as CoD players, as far as play style, what kinds of players there are - that kind of thing, how would you do it?

Todd: So the way that I've always kind of thought about it in my head was you had short-range players that really focus on shotguns, pretty high powered pistols or even knives or that type of degree. You have mid-range players that focus more on assault rifles, like AK-47's, M-16's, and that kind of stuff… you know, they could have range…like, zoom in when you have to, but for the most part you can just go no-scope and, you know, do well enough when it comes to that. Many of the long-range players, which are mostly the snipers, in that type of game that's what they really focus on. They are more, you know, camp in one spot [players]. Maybe [they] put a claymore [landmine] behind them, so if someone tries to run behind them they get blown up. And, you know, they just kind of sit there and they wait for an opportunity to strike.

As the remarks above indicate, engaging in a particular style of play often dictates expectations on the appropriate types of objects to use, as well as shapes perceptions of the legitimacy of techniques to employ during competitive play. Todd distinguishes the no-scoping technique as a competency and the mid-range strategy as a style of play. Players often use a combination of the skills in which they have acquired sufficient competency as they adopt different styles of play. Further, CoD players can be observed employing different styles of play in varied contexts while citing a number of different motivations for doing so. While far from random acts, these "on-the-fly" decisions regarding the appropriateness of action are consistent with what has been demonstrated in prior studies, as members of consumption communities have often been shown to vary in their interpretation and enactment of competencies as they pursue various individual and collective ends (e.g., Arsel and Bean 2013; Thomas, Price and Schau 2013; Schau et al 2009). Though this often the basis of practical innovation, it is also often the source of tension and contestation within these kinds of communities. Coupled with the previous instances from the data, this highlights that for CoD players it is equally important to develop cultural knowledge of when it is appropriate to use these skills and techniques. Here, consumers learn many techniques and develop competencies in these skills that facilitate the practice of playing CoD. However, they also develop their own perceptions and interpretations regarding the appropriate application of these competencies in particular situations. In doing so, players in the CoD community make tacit delineations between accrued technical skills and the styles of play that often incorporate these skills.

This emic interpretation of the data suggests that it may be necessary to conceptually distinguish between two types of cultural knowledge requite for the

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performance of playing CoD; knowledge related to object-oriented competencies and knowledge related to their appropriate use. The elements of practice framework, as it has been applied in previous studies, tends to conceptualize competencies (or other such related terms like "doings," "understandings," and "skills") in a manner that focuses solely on the emergent routines and embodied skills related to the use of objects and material resources (Arsel and Bean 2013; Shove, Pantzar and Watson 2012; Magaudda 2011; Shove and Pantzar 2007, 2005). Conceived this way, the notion of competencies does little to address how consumers attain and use cultural knowledge pertaining to "how" and "when" competencies are to be employed (Maciel and Wallendorf, forthcoming).

In addressing this conceptual inefficiency, I offer sociologist Ann Swidler's (1986) notion of strategies of action as a suitable conceptual tool for understanding the ways in which competencies interact with, and are incorporated into, other forms of cultural knowledge in the performance of playing CoD. Swidler, whose approach to practice differs from those derived from Warde, argues that culture can be conceived of as providing individuals with a "toolkit" of resources from which actors can construct diverse strategies of action. Constructing a strategy of action involves selecting certain cultural elements (tacit attitudes and styles, or explicit rituals and beliefs) and investing them within particular meanings and concrete life circumstances (Swidler 1986, p. 275-77). From this perspective, individuals use a broader form of cultural knowledge to determine which objects and types of skills are necessary for particular kinds of circumstances. Strategies of action require forms of competency that enable people to use objects as well as a cultural understanding of context in which the use of these

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competencies will be embedded. To this end, each of the objects and competencies that emerge within the CoD community is viewed as a cultural resource. CoD players construct strategies of action to address a variety of competitive situations by sorting through and employing combinations of these resources. This begins to explain how some players may deem it appropriate to drop-shot opponents in the back or use powerful long-range weapons in close-combat situations while others consider this to be illegitimate behavior. The strategy of action that a given player adopts is, in essence, a function of their understanding or interpretation of the CoD community as a culture. This conceptualization of how the CoD culture shapes action is in line with the practice theoretical perspective that the behavioral manifestations of a given practice are a function of individuals' stores of relevant cultural capital within a particular field or social domain (Warde 2005; Bourdieu 1990, 1984).

I argue that for the current analysis, distinguishing between competencies and strategies of action allows for a theoretical understanding of how the elements related to the embodiment of a practice are understood, enacted, and, at times, contested among community members that is at present incomplete in extant research. While many CoD players are at times ambivalent about acquiring competency in techniques like drop-shooting or no-scoping, some strategies of action, like "camping," tend to always incite divisive reactions.

Camping is a commonly-adopted passive style of play whereby players remain relatively stationary in a single strategic position on the map waiting for opponents to come into killing range. The use of camping is controversial because players can typically get multiple kills without having to face opponents head-on. As the interview

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continues, Todd elaborates on the long-range playstyle and the legitimacy of "camping" as he describes how one should first learn how to play the game:

Todd: When I was actually bringing some people in that had never, like, played a [first-person] shooter before… [I was] pointing out hot spots on the map. It's like 'this is where this map bottlenecks, so usually a lot of people have to go through here to get to this area' and not necessarily [showing them] camping, but being able to go, you know, wait maybe a couple of seconds, get up, move, wait a couple of seconds and just kind of, like, knowing how that works.

Interviewer: Okay. What is it about camping that's not acceptable?

Todd: Camping is lame. Camping is so lame. [laughter]. No, I joke about that a good bit. To be fair, camping can be a legitimate strategy…Just for me, historically, being a mid-range player, mid-range players do not like [players that use] snipers, so I think that's just kind of, like, my own bias against camping…The only times I do not think it's a legitimate strategy is if they end up getting into some sort of area that the game designer did not intend them to get to and it's almost impossible to get to them. And then that's just - that feels - it's

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cheating. Like, you basically broke the game in order to win the game.

The excerpt begins with Todd describing how he goes about sharing valuable cultural knowledge with newcomers regarding how to appropriately navigate and take advantage of the game's virtual environments. Initially, he is careful not to suggest that he has been teaching other players how to camp. What is implied by Todd's instructive remarks is that, ideally, players are expected to be effective without being exploitative. The stigma tied to camping is generally associated with exploitative behavior, as players that use this strategy of action are often perceived as seeking "easy" kills. However, when pressed on the legitimacy of camping as a strategy of action, Todd admits to his own biases and further suggests that there are circumstances in which camping is a "legitimate." In the CoD community experienced players are expected to have a nuanced understanding of what distinguishes instances of camping as a legitimate strategy from instances of camping as a "lame" strategy. As a number of instances in the data suggest, camping is particularly reprehensible when coupled with using some of the games more exploitative techniques. For example, camping in a heavily-traversed area with limited access points while using a close-range weapon is considered excessive, "cheap" and cowardly. By contrast, camping in an open space for a limited time while using a long-range rifle is generally understood to be appropriate.

In the CoD community, players not only develop skill sets based on procedural knowledge of how material resources are most effectively used, they also rely on their accrued cultural understandings, such as what Todd has described here, to inform them about the appropriate circumstances under which these skills are to be used. The field of

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CoD provides a repertoire of materials and competencies that are differentially interpreted by members within the community. And distinguishing competencies (e.g., drop-shooting) from strategies of action or styles of play (e.g., camping) empirically demonstrates the presence of an understanding of what constitutes legitimate strategy, a form of cultural knowledge itself that is distinct from the knowledge and skills related to using objects effectively. From this perspective, playing CoD the "right way" requires employing appropriate strategies of action as much as it calls for players to develop particularized skills with requisite objects and material resources. Keeping these conceptual distinctions between competencies and strategies of action in mind, I now return to the discussion to the topic of modified controllers and the social construction of contested practices. Again, I use the purist and modder ideal types to highlight important distinctions in how they perceive the use of modified controllers and rely on these concepts to develop a much richer theoretical understanding of the contested nature of these objects in the CoD community.

Purists and Competency. Purists and modders diverge on several aspects regarding the legitimacy of modified controller use. Purists perceive legitimate competencies as being limited to the skills one develops while using objects and other material resources the way producers and game developers intended. The following excerpt from an online discussion outlines the purists' perspective on competencies involving modified controllers:

> Why allow non-stock controllers at all? So what if the players think the extra trigger pull is a wasted effort? Train your finger to not pull all the way. Clearly, too, the game was planned with a controller layout that did not allow jumping,

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aiming, and firing all at the same time without the finger gymnastics. If you break the game design with a modded controller, it makes sense [to] just ban the mod. (Eleison - comment thread -pennyarcade.com article).

This player asserts their presumption that the game's developers have designed CoD using stock equipment. He/she uses this presumption as a boundary condition – setting limitations on what is physically possible. This player goes on to argue that relying on one's physical dexterity while using standard equipment to execute complex moves is primarily what should constitute competency. Knowing what combination of buttons are to be pushed and having the capability to consistently perform these actions are the only form of legitimate competency. For purists, using modified controllers to execute complex techniques is understood as emergent behaviors and routines that fall outside the scope of the game's design. As such, modified controller use is not demonstrative of the skills that are relevant to the practice of playing CoD.

For purists, modified controller use also indicates that an individual lacks the skills necessary to compete "fairly." This much is evident in the following comments made by Rico (34yrs-old - bartender) as he explains how he would go about identifying potential mod users while playing the game:

Rico: If I was play[ing] regular team death match and saw the same
              person over and over again just one shot, one [kill], I'd
              probably think something's going on. But hey, if he needs that
              advantage, more power to him.

Interviewer: That's interesting, more power to him? What does that say about him as a player?

Rico: It just says that he doesn't feel comfortable with his own skills. Me, I wouldn't do that. I wouldn't sacrifice, I guess, my integrity in the game… I think the more you play, the better you get, [like] with anything else. So, I feel like that would be pointless to what I'm actually trying to do out there. Like, it would take the fun out of it for me knowing that I'm just running around instantly killing people. That's not what I'm in it for.

As Rico describes the kinds of behavior observed during game play that may indicate modified controller use, he elucidates how purists interpret this behavior as reflecting a lack of competency. That is, modified controllers are perceived as a "crutch" by many purists and the people who use modified controllers are not competent in executing the game's more complex techniques (e.g., drop-shooting, no-scoping, etc.). Rico goes on to echo the notion that developing one's own ability to execute these kinds of techniques is ideal; noting that being able to automate their performance would take the "fun" out of the experience and diminish his motivation to play. For many purists the idea of modified controller use eliminates the need for cultivating such skills and makes the purpose for playing CoD somewhat ambiguous.

Modders and Competency. Modders' perceptions of legitimate competency also involve the ability to effectively deploy complex techniques like drop-shooting and no-

scoping, but primarily through the use of modified controllers. Moreover, modders recognize the capacity to make modified controllers and use them effectively in competitive play as two distinct skillsets. Evidence from the data suggests that developing competencies related to building and utilizing modified controllers is widely revered among modders in the CoD community. This is exemplified in the following comments taken from two unrelated online discussions where modders highlight these "skills:"

> I, personally, have a home-brew rapidfire controller. However, it's dismantled in a box in my closet because of some faulty soldering. When it did work, it was a novelty. I'd spray a barrett .50 cal clip into the air [or] shoot a FAL clip off scarcely faster than my own finger could…So if you can make one, more power to you. Soldering is a good skill to have for sure. (rsjc741 - callofduty.com forums).

> I don't think it's cheating by any means. Along with any kind of perk or weapon you could use in the game, [rapid-fire] chips come with pros and cons. A modded controller is not going to make you a beast mode player by any means. Just like anything it requires a lot of man hours to adapt how to use one. Any decent gamer can learn how to exploit an exploit and that's how you bring your kill count higher…using a mod chip requires a certain skill level…It's what takes the game to the next level and remember that's exactly what this is. Just a game. I bought my mod chip and spent the time soldering and installing it into my existent

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controller because I wanted something to combat the guys running around with full auto strikers and diving on their face. (Zade08 - neoseeker.com forums).

Forum commenter rsjc741 directly voices the notion that the act of modifying a controller demonstrates a form of competency on its own. He/she describes his/her modified controller creation as "home-brewed," drawing on vocabulary more commonly associated with the emergent craft beer subculture and other aesthetic consumption communities. This choice of words reveals the types cultural analogs that modders tend to use as frames of reference. Similar to consumers that formulate and craft batches of beer in their homes, many modders see themselves as gaming "connoisseurs" who subtly push the boundaries and engineering innovations within their respective field (Maciel and Wallendorf, forthcoming). The commenter also points out that the controller is currently inoperable due to poor craftsmanship and notes the beneficial nature of having the capacity to modify controllers, essentially reinforcing it as a laudable skill. As the market for preassembled modified controllers emerged and proliferated, the data show that modders also began to exhibit an appreciation for the ability to discern quality and make informed purchase decisions within the burgeoning marketplace.

The comment from Zade08 more directly reflects the understanding among modders that being able to effectively use a modified controller constitutes a legitimate competency. This player opens by arguing that modified controller use is not cheating. This is a point commonly asserted in modders' discourse. It is a counterargument addressing the implicit assumption in the arguments presented by many purists, suggesting that mod users are relying on economic resources and technology to compensate for their lack of requisite skill and their overall inability to play the game the

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"right" way. Notably, throughout the data it was fairly commonplace for both modders and purists to define their perceptions of playing CoD in terms of one another. As this player continues, he/she likens the use of modified controllers to selecting between types of virtual content like "perks and weapons" by implying that a similar assessment of the costs and benefits associated with each of these types of objects should precede usage. This player also points out that the use of modified controller does not instantly make you a great player, suggesting that competency can only be refined through repetition. From a modder's perspective, effective mod use requires an advanced level of skill, equivalent to the kinds of skills cultivated to effectively use other legitimate objects and resources in the field.

Purists and Strategies of Action. The role of the modified controller in constructing and enacting strategies of action is at the heart of the tension between purists and modders in the CoD community. This sentiment is captured in the following exchange on an online comment thread where two community members debate whether modified controllers improve the game play experience by giving players more control of their characters:

Kered13   [Modified controllers] are used to allow players to perform a move known as the "jump shot" which involves them quickly leaping into the air while targeting and shooting at the enemy… Everyone and their mother can do [this] on a PC with half an hour of practice… The modded controllers are just a symptom of the real problem: Console controls are complete trash. I don't blame the players for trying to get

some half-way decent controls… The controller mods obviously make the game better…

Machines   @ Kered13 - Allowing "noclip" would give players more control over their character, but you'd have a hard time arguing that would be better. Limitations are part of competitions, they are necessary. I don't understand how making the game easier makes it better. I think that's boring. It would be like boxers using weighted gloves to make their punches hit harder. Even if both sides agree, we'd only have shorter, less exciting matches.

The first commenter explicitly adopts a modder's perspective as he/she highlights the utility and rationale for incorporating modified controllers into gameplay strategies. More detailed analysis of the ideas expressed in the modder's perspective follows in the subsequent section. Here these modder's comments are used to provide context for the basis of purists' perceptions of mod use and strategies of action and to properly highlight the interdependent nature of these two perspectives. The second commenter responds to the modder's argument by calling attention to the necessity for limitations in competition implying that having everyone disregard the game designers' intentions without oversight will not equate to improving the game. Moreover, the second commenter suggests that removing the game's structural boundaries (i.e., allowing "noclip") would also give players more control at the expense of ruining the game's competitive spirit. Specifically, "nocliping" refers to a common software hack in gaming where some, or all, structural boundaries (e.g., walls, buildings, "physical" structures) are removed for certain players

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during game play. In CoD, noclipping allows players to move in areas that were not intended to be accessible, shoot through walls, and easily locate opponents, who are likely still constrained by the game's mechanics and boundaries. Noclipping is widely-regarded as disreputable behavior across gaming communities and purists see modified controller use as synonymous with these types of "all-access" and "anything-goes" strategies and tactics. Purists see modified controller use as a detriment to their overall gaming experiences with regards to their use in constructing strategies of action. That is, for purists, one's cultural understanding of the behaviors and actions that are both possible and acceptable in the CoD community should inherently negate the use of modified controller to simplify their gameplay. Moreover, they believe this to be true under almost any circumstance.

Conceptualizing all the complex skills, techniques, and technical knowledge of the game as being a part of CoD's cultural repertoire, purists believe that all players should be limited to only exercising the skills and techniques in which they have developed a degree of competency as they construct strategies of action. That is, ideally, a player's strategic options in a given situation should be both shaped and restricted by a combination of contextual and structural constraints of the field as well as their ability to readily elicit and enact their learned capabilities. For purists, it is both having the ability to execute complex techniques (having competency) and the ability to discern which technique is appropriate for a given set of circumstances (understanding strategies of action) that embody one's complete store of cultural knowledge of performing the practice of playing CoD appropriately. From the purists' perspective, the potential for human error in demonstrating competency and choosing strategies of action is the basis

by which players can evaluate one another. Consequently, purists perceive modified controllers as contentious primarily due to their creating the potential for players to be able to execute all skills and techniques automatically in any situation. Also, some of these controllers grant additional abilities and skills that are not possible with the use of standard equipment (e.g., rapid fire, enhanced maneuverability). Using a modified controller to facilitate one's strategies of action violates cultural boundaries and expectations, ultimately diminishing the social value of any action performed with one.

The abstention from modified controllers is a tacitly-understood cultural rule for CoD purists. However, there are some generally accepted exceptions to cultural rules. In explaining the situations where modified controllers are okay to use, Todd points out one particular "grey-area" where mods may be a legitimate option to supplement one's abilities, while reiterating the exploitative nature of adopting this strategy:

Interviewer: Are there times when modified controller use is okay to you?

Todd: Honestly, when it comes to any of that kind of cheating, like, I just - you know, it kind of turns my stomach. I'm a competitive person and if it is some sort of unfair advantage that the people who were creating the game did not intend for someone to use I do not think that's okay pretty much in any circumstance. Now, there is a little bit of a grey area when it comes to, like, something actually

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really specific…there are some cases where sometimes something isn't physically possible and it's not really due to any type of skill limitation, but physical limitation. One of my friends, he kind of lost the ability to us his right arm. And so a lot of times when he, you know, plans on certain things, like, he has special controllers where it's not really physically possible for him to do it. I don't consider that cheating. You know, you're just trying to get back [to] what you could use.

For some purists, modified controller use can be seen as a legitimate means to supplement one's gameplay for those who are physically incapable of playing the game at a normal competitive level. As describe above, in these instances, controller modifications can level the playing field by allowing disabled gamers to incorporate complex skills and techniques into their strategies of action. This "exception" to the rules also subtly reinforces the notion that for purists, human capacity is a fixed boundary condition. In essence, one's cultural repertoire in the CoD community is interpreted as being limited to what you are physically able to do. Ultimately, purists hold competencies and strategies of action in relatively equal regard as embodiments of the practice of playing CoD.

Modders and Strategies of Action. Modders also share a distinct perspective on the relationship between mod use and constructing strategies of action. Presumably, modders privilege the ability to construct effective strategies of action over the development of competence in skills like drop-shooting and no-scoping. These

perceptions are evident in the following comments from an interview with William (23yrs old – college student):

> I mean I can be the best sniper, you know, in the game but if I'm not in a position to snipe someone, it doesn't matter. If I'm the best shooter with a battle rifle but yet everybody keeps getting behind me … and I'm seeing them after they've seen me. Then they've planned. They get to me before I know where they are. I mean that's how you win… It's not, you know, the headphones that are giving you footsteps in some direction. It's not the [controller] thing that's speeding your gun up or this or that. The people that are at the top are there because they're just that much more knowledgeable, just that much more strategic…they've mastered it. They've taken the time to understand everything, to understand what it means… The people that are going 30 and zero, the second they enter the lobby they're looking at loadouts of everyone on the other team. Oh, I see this guy's got a sniper with these perks and these perks and these perks. I know that's going to mean he's going to do this. He's going to be in this place looking for me here so I'm going to do this in anticipation of this. They've taken it way beyond what the average person goes to do… It's the psychology in my opinion.

As William indicates, modders do not see competency in learned techniques as being demonstrative of valued talents or expertise; rather these are perceived as baseline skills for elite competitors. Players that stand out (e.g., have 30 kills and 0 deaths in a match) are those that have developed the situational adeptness required to repeatedly anticipate and counter the competencies and strategies of others. For modders, exercising one's

cultural knowledge in constructing effective strategies of action is the primary embodiment of the practice of playing CoD.

While playing CoD, all players face various types of opponents that vary in skill-level and playstyle as well as a host of contextual and environments factors. The notion of cultivating a level of understanding that would allow a player to process all of these elements across a variety of competitive situations and produce the most appropriate sequence of actions has been somewhat fetishized by modders. That is, modders have come to detach the cultural knowledge related to knowing "what should be done" in a particular situation from the procedural knowledge related to the physical aspects of playing the game and knowing "how to do" with regard to enacting competencies like no-scoping and drop-shooting. Fundamentally, modders tend to place emphasis on developing a strategic understanding of what move should be performed "when," "why," and what outcome is to be expected. At the same time, factors like recalling what combination of buttons are to be pushed and having the capacity to reliably do so are less important to them.

William's comments also hint at the idea that advanced equipment like modified controllers and stereo headsets merely play a background role in facilitating the construction of strategies of action. This is a common theme found in the emic accounts of modders in the data as they describe how and why modified controllers are used in competitive play in attempts to justify their legitimacy. As William continues his discussion on the importance of cultivating and enacting strategic knowledge, the nature of the modified controller's role in this process is elucidated:

You can buy an account, you can buy gold, you can even buy cheats and mods, but you can't buy skill. …I think that for most gamers, we reach a plateau where our gaming skills level off. We don't get any better or any worse. Most people start off poorly, but as you learn the mechanics of the game and a little strategy and whatnot, your skills get better, but in a sort of law of diminishing marginal returns format. Once I reached a certain point, I needed to learn and strategize. I needed to further understand the game and how to effectively play it, and outthink my opponents. That's not something that you can simply "buy". That's not something that a controller or headset could compensate for. Yes, using the controller for the first few days was pretty cool, but did it make me a better player? No. I still lost to people better than me because of the reasons they were better than me- they outsmarted and outplayed me. Did it even give me an unfair advantage? I don't really think so.

Throughout this portion of the interview, William explicitly downplays the notion that modified controllers provide an unfair advantage, reiterating the idea that equipment in of itself does not make a player better. He then basically describes modified controllers as having a purely facilitative role, having no bearing on the outcome of competitive interactions. For William, developing competencies with the material resources used to play the game is an inevitability for most players and, thus, finding ways to construct advantageous strategies of action becomes both necessary and increasingly difficult. For such players, modified controllers offer a solution to an emergent problem. Like William,

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many modders think all players have a finite ceiling for developing competence. This is in line with his earlier statements and the popular belief among players in general that certain skills will naturally come to anyone who commits to playing the game. As such, modders share the belief that most serious players can eventually master techniques like drop-shooting and no-scoping and that most of the people playing CoD are (or should be) somewhat competent at these skills.

Where modders diverge from purists is in the shared perception that competency in these skills is diffuse, and that these techniques have reached a point of saturation within the community. The key aspect of the presumptions highlighted here is that modders now see constructing effective strategies of action as the only means of gaining a competitive advantage in playing CoD. Modified controllers are seen, then, as an effective means to addressing this emergent issue. These controllers eliminate the need to devote cognitive and physical resources to executing complex techniques and center competitive play around strategies of action; allowing players to focus their attention on exercising their knowledge of situations and circumstances. From this perspective, mods have emerged as an artifact of the distribution of talent and structural limitations within the field and serve to fix the competitive inefficiencies produced by these factors.

Modders' particular conceptualizations of modified controllers and their relationship to competencies and strategies of action may be also be attributed to the process of problematization. Arsel and Bean (2013) argue that particular aspects of integrative practices can be problematized, and modders have problematized the structural constraints presented by the game's design and the limitations of the standard equipment. To resolve these issues, they appear to engage in the process of performative

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integration (e.g. Maguadda 2011; Hand and Shove 2007). That is, they see the mod as a new form of materiality that is being integrated into pre-existing dispersed practices that are already deemed legitimate. Using a modified controller in itself may be new, but the tasks being performed by the controller are those that are already a routine part of playing CoD. By contrast, purists appear to be actively engaged in processes of stigmatization and delegitimation of the modified controller by placing it adjacent to other illicit objects in the field. In sum, while competencies and strategies of action both represent the most manifest forms of practice for modders, they tend to give the latter priority in demonstrating embodied cultural knowledge. Modders also grant legitimacy to forms of competence involving the construction, acquisition, and effective use of modified controllers, while purists perceive these skills as external, and in many ways detrimental, to the community.

Disputed Links to Symbolic Capital and Contested Frames of Meanings

Prior conceptualizations of the elements of practice framework have highlighted how types of desired ends and varied forms of normative structure (political ideologies, taste regimes, etc.) have both been particularly influential in shaping how members of consumption communities understand practices, in distinct ways (Arsel and Bean 2013; Schau et al. 2009; Shove and Pantzar 2007; Crockett and Wallendorf 2004). From a practice theory perspective, consumption communities are fields where all social action is organized around both the pursuit of status (i.e., symbolic capital) and adherence to the discursive systems of meaning (i.e., collective frames) on which community-specific

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values, mores, and beliefs are founded (Schatzki 2002, 1996; Holt 1998; Bourdieu 1984, 1990). This much is evident in how members of the CoD community organize their actions around the pursuit of particular idealized objects, outcomes, desired ends, and symbols that signify status within the community. Social action in the community is also influenced by emergent discourses that give meaning to certain objects, forms of competences, strategies of action, and status symbols, albeit in a tacit manner. Taken together, the pursuit of symbolic capital and the normative influence of emergent frames play particularly important yet unique roles in giving meaning and purpose to the other elements of practice.

Links to Symbolic Capital. The cultural significance and social value ascribed to both objects and competencies in the CoD community is in many ways tied to access to symbolic capital. The direct and openly competitive nature of this gaming culture pushes the accrual of field-specific symbolic capital to the forefront of nearly every social interaction. As described elsewhere, winning matches, having impressive statistical profiles, and even "real world" achievements like participating in professional tournaments are all ostensibly laudable goals for members of the CoD community. Attaining these desired ends, along with more explicit performance-based signifiers of status like reaching top-rank on community leaderboards and the accrual of in-game "earned" content like emblems, special items, and privileges, are the forms of symbolic capital that CoD players both pursue and compete directly with one another for in order to connote their particular social location in the community hierarchy. However, evidence from the data suggests that both modders and purists have developed divergent

perspectives of the modified controller's legitimacy in the pursuit of various elements within the game that signify status.

Purists essentially view most forms of symbolic capital accrued by using a modified controller as "ill-gotten gains." This sentiment is captured in the following excerpt from an online comment thread where a community member expresses dismay over the use of modified controllers in professional CoD tournaments arranged by Major League Gaming (MLG), a well-known institution among gamers that organizes and promotes professional video game tournaments worldwide. This player makes direct comparisons between modified controller use and the presence of illicit objects in professional sports:

> Pro sports players all have access to steroids but that doesn't mean they're allowed to use them. When I was younger I thought that the [professional gamers] were just the best of the best. But now I know it's just they have equipment that helps them perform actions that a regular person cannot. Another analogy is the baseball bat with the dimples like a golf ball. MLB banned these as an unfair advantage even though everyone would have had access to them. MLG should be the same. It should be based on pure skill and talent across the board without allowing the use of mods in any way. (MikeG78 – comment thread – pennyarcade.com article).

The comment implies that community members should exercise restraint, pointing to the fact that the mere presence and availability of modified controllers does not legitimize their use. For this community member, playing in a highly-competitive professional

context does not justify the use of advanced or altered equipment. In fact, this player gives the impression that he/she feels somewhat deceived by this recent revelation. The use of modified controllers is highly exploitative and analogous to relying on illicit performance enhancing drugs or technologies. Hence, the status attributed to these elite players has been invalidated to a certain extent by their mod use. This association between modified controllers and the use of other objects related to cheating in professional sports was also a very common theme throughout the data. In contrast to the positive perception that mod use at the professional level has for modders, for purists the notion that professional players would collectively opt to use modified controllers only serves to lessen their opinions regarding the caliber of talent on display at professional CoD tournaments. From the emic perspective of purists, modified controller use is cheating, and attaining any form of symbolic capital, like the "elite" status of professional CoD players, by these means only serves to cheapen and diminish its social value.

As echoed throughout much of the data presented thus far, most purists recognize the formidable challenge in trying to directly compete with modders to attain performance-based forms of symbolic capital. This observation is very much at the heart of the tensions surrounding modified controllers within the CoD community. As such, purists have tacitly developed a shared understanding regarding performance expectations and what constitutes "real" status in the pursuit of symbolic capital as described in the quote bellow:

Whenever I encounter cheaters, this is my thought...How pathetic they have to cheat at a video game that has no real consequence in life. Personally, I'd rather lose knowing I played the game well instead of enjoying the "benefits" of winning

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through cheating. Then again, I'm not a scumbag. (combatvetizaf –

callofduty.com forums)

Purists primarily derive status, and imbue others with it, for being able to compete

adequately without the modified controller. Consequently, ideals like comparing

statistical profiles with modders or climbing the ranks of the leaderboards at a

comparable pace are undesirable or not as meaningful to purists. Fundamentally, the only

valid way for purists to accrue symbolic capital in the community is by using "standard"

equipment. To be able to hold one's own with a standard controller in an environment

potentially teeming with mod users is often described by purists with an air of nobility.

Status stems from a sense of moral superiority, where using a modified controller calls

into question a player's moral compass. These shared understandings among purists also

tacitly raise the symbolic status of standard controller for these players as the game is

considered more challenging given competition with modified controllers. Interestingly,

this perception is somewhat mirrored in the modder argument mod use actually improves

the competitive environment. While both would agree that an adroit performance with a

standard controller is worthy of respect, where purists diverge is in their belief that this is

an ideal, or even necessary, part of the competitive experience.

By contrast, modders tend to see modified controller use as legitimate means to

their desired ends as argued in the following comment from a chat thread on the

callofduty.com forums:

[Modified controller users] should definitely not be banned for doing that. Not

only is it hard to detect …but they actually went out of their own way to mod

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their controllers, they deserve those extra kills in my humble opinion. I'm sick of noobs complaining, either put up with it, play locally and/or with friends or mod yours too. Peace out, hombre. (nunezapath - CoD.com forums).

As this player suggests, modders largely believe that the effort that players put into making controller modifications coupled with the risk one incurs while using these devices entitles these players to "extra kills" and other forms of symbolic capital. Many modders that purchase preassembled modified controllers also make similar claims justifying any perceived advantages based on the price premium and the costs they incur. Moreover, many modders feel that the proliferation of modified controllers and the inability to consistently detect their use should provide an added element of satisfaction when players perform well. In response to another player complaining about being regularly victimized by mod users, one community member explains that "this is CoD, expect an unfair match against everyone you play and when you have a good game you will appreciate it more" (Moegitto – gamerfaq.com forums). The existence of modified controllers presents the added challenge of potentially facing other modders; making a respectable performance all the more socially rewarding.

Discussions on forums where players describe their motives for acquiring modified controllers reveal that the possession of a modified controller has become a form of symbolic capital in and of itself. Many players anchor status on using the same equipment as professional players, often boasting that they are personally using, or have access to, the same brand of modified controller that "the pros use." Other players are merely attracted to the appearance of these controllers as one community member writes "Lol, I have that controller is it even a modded one? I know it has buttons on the back

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but…I just bought it in Gamestop when I bought the game. It's more for show than anything because I think it looks cool" (stiffler187 – neoseeker.com forums). While most modders call attention to the ergonomic and utilitarian benefits of mod use, for many these devices have transcended functionality and are appreciated equally, and at times exclusively, for their aesthetic form. Still others take pride in knowingly "breaking the rules" of the field seeing mod use as a direct challenge to the game's developers and producers. The combination of technological aesthetization and perception of risk-taking associated with modified controllers has allowed many modders to identify the acquisition and use of these devices as being worthy of reverence from peers. The recognition of the modified controller as constituting symbolic capital is akin to the status-granting nature of high-end periphery equipment in more broadly known forms of dramatic "high-risk" leisure consumption (Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993). However, here the notions of drama, risk, and nascent aesthetic appeal are strictly confined to the CoD community.

Contested Frames of Meanings. Thus, far this dissertation has highlighted numerous distinctions between modders and purists across various elements of the practice, all revolving around the use of these devices. However, these elements of practices are bound together and given meaning by frames of meaning that have been described throughout. Specifically, two distinct and opposing frames of meaning shape (and are shaped by) the discourse surrounding modified controllers. Purists adopt a morality frame that reinforces notions of honor and integrity enacted in competition. Modders adopt a technophile frame that incorporates a range of pro-technology discourses.

Here I rely on the concepts of collective frames and framing from sociological theory and the social movements literature to elucidate the nature and function of these frames of meaning as they relate to other elements of practice in the CoD community. A collective frame can be conceived of as a "lens" through which otherwise disconnected individuals interpret the world they live in similar ways (Benford and Snow 2000; Gamson 1995; Goffman 1974). Framing refers to the process by which collective frames are strategically used to rationalize thought and behavior or justify action. Collective frames are essentially cultural devices that members of a society or community use to make sense of, and attach meaning to, the objects, events, and experiences they encounter (Snow and Byrd 2007; Snow 2004; Benford and Snow 2000; Snow, Rochford, Worden and Benford 1986; Goffman 1974). As noted in previously cited consumer research, collective frames and framing-related concepts been particularly useful theoretical and empirical tools in the study of collective forms of meaning. Moreover, the notions of collective frames and framing present a means of highlighting the normative and influential nature of the purists' and modders' perspectives as singular cultural elements in this research, while minimizing the risk of being overly reductionist.

The Morality Frame. As alluded to earlier, the collective frame that both captures and informs the purist perspective revolves around notions of fair play, honor, and integrity. Purists view the CoD community as being grounded in a set of moral principles that provide general behavioral guidelines and broadly shape expectations for competition and social interaction within the community. The following exchange taken from an interview with Todd, a lifelong gamer, articulately summarizes this purist

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morality frame by defining actions that occur outside the framework of the developer's intent as "breaking the rules."

Interviewer:	Where would you say these rules come from? Just, you know, I mean, are there some things that are sort of unwritten?
Todd:	There's definitely like some unwritten rules, I guess kind of like an honor code for a lot of people. So that does exist, but when I'm referring to it I'm talking about the rules involving game mechanics, which is kind of the rules that govern the interaction of the game. So if you start modifying those then you're not playing the game as it was intended to be played.
Interviewer:	That's interesting. You mentioned the honor code. What's the honor code about?
Todd:	The honor code, of course, you know - well, you could say the no cheating. So it's kind of like the obvious, you know, not using equipment that gives you some sort of unfair advantage. And then even some of the honor code stuff goes into, like, the "lame" territory where, you know, "no camping" and don't use noob tubes or something to that degree where, you know, just because it is built into the game it could [be] so easily exploited where someone who isn't very skilled can, you know, get

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> higher and higher in the ranks. It really kind of turns off the
> people who want to play the game how they want to play it.
> And, again, that's kind of like community driven. That's not by
> the developers or anything like that, but people started
> agreeing. It's, like, okay, well, this is allowed, you know, this
> isn't allowed; this is cool, this isn't cool kind of thing.

Todd's initial comments generally reinforce and/or reiterate many of the themes and ideals that were subtly, and at times explicitly, present in earlier purist accounts. He begins to tie these themes together as he describes the emergence of "unwritten rules" and defines what he calls the "honor code." As Todd explains the honor code he distinguishes its normative influence on social life within the community from the effects of mechanics-oriented features of the game's design that structurally constrain players' actions. He then begins to draw a fairly nuanced distinction between exploitative, or "lame," behavior and more deeply stigmatized forms of disreputable behavior that purists associate with cheating – emphasizing that modified controllers tend to fall in the latter of the two categories. For purists, the labels and meanings ascribed to objects, competencies, strategies of action and symbolic capital are derived from, and representations of an unspoken, morally-based, shared understanding among CoD gamers. The emergent collective frames that provide meaning for the use of modified controllers in the practice of playing CoD do so by appropriating the modified controller into unique networks of meaning that define its social role within each element of this practice. These frames also then connect these elements to one another in a way that reproduce these two distinct ideal types.

The honor code described here by Todd also hints at expectations of stewardship and personal responsibility for protecting the gaming environment that gamers are ideally expected to uphold. This sense of "duty," or obligation to maintain the integrity of the CoD community is more explicitly stated in the following excerpt from a callofduty.com posting where an apparent purist delivers a cautionary message about the dangers of cheating in nostalgic fashion:

> I miss the days when Fair Play actually meant something... Play Fair and be respected for your progress. Cheat, and only a cheater will respect you. Kids these days are too ignorant and greedy, only wanting to be number one… And they'll use every means possible to become that special #1... (Stumperud78 – callofduty.com forum)

The morality frame adopted and enacted by purists in the CoD community primarily aims to reproduce "responsible" gamers. Taken in combination with aspects the morality frame highlighted by Todd, CoD gamers are personally responsible for avoiding exploitive behavior, resisting the temptation to cheat, and generally maintaining the integrity of the game. Ideally, this kind of behavior would contribute to a more positive and egalitarian experience for all members of the CoD community.

Collective frames are intended to be both diagnostic and prognostic, as they serve to motivate actors to act in very particular ways (Benford and Snow 2000). Hence, the public service announcement-styled tone of this message is appropriate as it explicitly identifies modified controller use as a social problem, hints at the moral consequences for violating the underlying moral code (e.g., "only a cheater will respect you"), then implicitly suggests that gamers should hold each other accountable for "playing fair."

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Comments such as these were common throughout the data and are illustrative of a community-level form of "responsibilization" and moralistic governance that has also been exhibited in consumer culture more broadly (Giesler and Veresiu 2014). Members of the CoD community are encouraged to be responsible gamers and not taint the competitive environment in the CoD community with exploitative or "cheating" behavior.

Notably, Todd also makes special effort to call attention to the fact that the emergence of the code of honor is community-driven. Frames are social constructions comprised of relevant discourses that resonate with certain people, begin to coalesce and then spread throughout a society or community; transforming these disparate discourses into a singularly identifiable normative framework. Here, the morality frame is endogenously articulated and elaborated through the discursive activity of those within the community, then strategically used to rationalize behavior, give meaning to events, occurrences, and outcomes. These processes are akin to those involved in the development of frames that serve to motivate collective action in more macro-societal contexts such as organized political protests and social movements (Snow and Byrd 2007). Both the morality frame and technophile frame articulated by modders (discussed elsewhere) are endogenous to the CoD Community in that they are interpreted and enacted in ways that are distinct to the CoD field. However, similar manifestations of these frames are found in other communities. Evidence from the data show that variants of these and other frames are common to gaming culture and operate simultaneously across multiple gaming communities. Gamers often belong to multiple communities at once and rely on their experiences across these communities, to varying degrees, when

shaping or adjusting their frames. This is illustrated in the following online comment where a CoD community member draws contrasts between gamers in different communities:

> It's so strange that modded controllers were even allowed in [CoD] tournament play, … I watch professional [StarCraft 2] players because they play at such a high skill level that normal players can't reach without months or years of training. But if an SC2 player is just using a special mouse and keyboard to do these things it takes the enjoyment out of watching them because I know it's not just the player but also the equipment. I would think it'd be the same with CoD… you play with the tools that everyone else has so you can prove that your own skillset is what is winning the game and not the controller (Atavan – comment thread – pennyarcade.com article).

The manifestation of these frames in other contexts often informs the way they are used to interpret their experiences in the CoD community. The morality frame, as espoused here, is not specific to modified controllers, nor to the CoD community itself, but does lend explanatory power in understanding why this purist so vehemently opposes user-modifications of this nature for any aspect of the game. This CoD community member thinks that Starcraft players represent a particularly skilled set of gamers. Discovering that professional Starcraft players mod would wipe away the mystique attributed to the talents displayed at tournaments. A similar sentiment has been described previously in this research by CoD players. Here, one can directly see how people use a "what if" hypothetical scenario in another community to prescribe the appropriate response in the context of professional CoD tournaments.

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Frames have many sources and may vary in scope. They may be totalizing, governing cognition, behavior, and social interaction across all aspects of social life, or they may be relevant to very specific social domains. Here one can observe the range of influence the morality frame exerts across multiple consumption communities. Ultimately, the morality frame, as it exists in the CoD community, is primarily deontological in nature; emphasizing adherence to a collectively understood set of principles. It serves to problematize and makes sense of issues related to the abuse of technology and its associated social consequences on moral grounds.

Nevertheless, instances exist where technology itself is directly framed as a threat to the community, as in the following comment from yet another community member questioning the use of modified controllers in professional CoD tournaments arranged by Major League Gaming (MLG):

> The [Developers] designed around, and tested the game with a normal controller... Like others have said: just ban the modified controllers. Or even better: Supply the controllers they are allowed to use, so MLG can make sure everyone is using the same equipment. This just opens the door to someone making another heretofore unknown controller modification and going "Godmode."… Seriously, doing some of the stuff they described is hard and that's part of the skill. Take that away and you might as well see who can program the best bots to play CoD (Gamer8585 – comment thread – pennyarcade.com article).

This purist argues for the value and importance of having players adhere to the use of the standard equipment by highlighting how technology threatens to replace base skills and

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remove the human aspect from the practice of playing the game completely. Purists often prognosticate that use of modified controllers will have a degenerative effect on the practice of playing CoD; causing the community to devolve into a "tech war" increasingly devoid of human involvement. The cautionary language here, warning against the potential social consequences of an over reliance on technology exhibits a tone of reflexive doubt (Thompson 2005). It is not unlike the "revenge-of-nature" discourse adopted by some consumers in the holistic health subculture or "green luddite"-oriented rhetoric adopted by consumers in broader consumer culture (Kozinets 2008; Thompson 2004). On the surface, the notion of video game players adopting a collective frame that openly opposes certain forms of technological advancement appears a bit antithetical. Yet, even though not explicitly, some elements of anti-technology discourse have emerged as part of the morality frame in the CoD community.

The "Technophile" Frame. The collective frame that has emerged for modders is a straightforward and familiar amalgamation of a wide range of pro-technology discourses that have been appropriated from other communities and broader consumer culture. Modders have adapted the frame to justify and rationalize the use of modified controllers in the context of playing CoD. Elements of the technophile frame are primarily drawn upon to directly defend the legitimacy of modified controller use and espouse their positive role in the community as exhibited in the following excerpt taken from an online debate over the legitimacy of modified controllers:

Regardless of what perk is given by a mod it will still be only as good as the player. I think that Hacks and Mods are a good thing. These have always contributed to pushing technology forward and they always will regardless of the

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complaints made by self-proclaimed purists who some feel we are supposed to think are motivated by some sort of principles. "Cheaters" are one part of what moves technology forward. Perhaps that is why the folks who use them may be reluctant to admit to using them as the quoted but above states. As long as people don't take this to the streets with real guns and ammo we should be able to have a good time regardless of the latest Mod. (CluttermoldO – neoseker.com forums)

This player adopts elements of a kind of "technotopian" trope, framing the use of devices like modified controllers as instruments of social progress (Kozinets 2008). For modders, science and technology are vehicles of change responsible for propelling the entire CoD community toward constructive forms of growth and development. As with purist and the morality frame, aspects of the various discourses that comprise the technophile frame can be read back into modders interpretations of the aforementioned elements of practice. Notably, this player also calls out purists by name and expresses cynicism towards the idea that they are guided by principle. The technophile frame tells modders who they are and are not by clearly identifying challengers to this disposition. What becomes evident in these remarks is that the technophile frame adopted by modders and the morality frame adopted by purists are co-constitutive. Because frames are also a defining component of both personal and collective identity for members of a community or society (Gamson 1995), the morality and technophile frames are not merely alternative interpretations of the same phenomenon. They are interdependent discursive entities that rely on elements of one another to construct both identities as unique and oppositional ideal types.

The technophile frame also associates modified controller use with notions of superior intelligence, efficiency, and strategic success. As much is evident in the

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following comment from the callofduty.com forums where a community member is explaining their logic behind adopting modified controller use:

I also want to add WHY I think it's okay for auto/rapid fire: As a human race, we have survived by being the smartest of all "animals". We are outmatched in strength, size, speed, and pretty much every other quality. Play smarter, not harder. If I have the ability to MAKE something (NOT BUY, NOT COPY A TUTORIAL, ETC) that gives me a smarter advantage over an opponent that may have better reflexes than me, I don't see how that's wrong. Like I said, "... is it cheating for the US military to use its technology against its enemies?"
(rock.theory – callofduty.com thread).

Modders do not presume a level playing field. They perceive objects like controllers as not only media for enacting practices but also as a means to improve performance. They see modification as an appropriate way to compensate for potential shortcomings in physical ability. Controller modifications are the technologies that level the playing field. This much is evident in the comparisons drawn between mod use and the US military's strategic use of technology in actual warfare. Here this player's remarks exhibit aspects of the "work-machine" technological discourse (Kozinets 2008) emphasizing ideals revolving around personal empowerment, resource control, and efficiency regarding the tasks related to competitive play in the CoD community.

It is also important to note that the morality and technophile frames are not inherently antithetical. There are numerous instances in consumer culture where technology has been cited as facilitating moral improvement or playing a role in making

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consumers "better people." Prior consumer research has found technological discourses to interpret aspects of morality and moral improvement as consonant with other benefits associated with technological innovation (Magaudda 2011; Kozinets 2008; Thompson 2004). Here, the technophile frame is teleological in nature; focusing on the social value of the outcome of action rather than the means by which these outcomes are achieved. This is in direct contrast to the morality frame that places emphasis on the social value associated with means by which community members pursue field-specific goals. From the data, the oppositional nature of the technophile and morality frames appears to be an artifact of the sociocultural context and related processes by which they have been appropriated by modders and purists in the CoD community.

CHAPTER 7

FRAME TRANSFORMATION AND EMERGENT INEQUALITY

Frame Transformation (Benford and Snow; 2000; Snow 2004) is the framework by which I explain how specific collective frames come to be dominant in emergent consumption communities and establish order. Frame transformation has been identified in the sociological literature as a strategic framing process; along with frame bridging, amplification, and extension. Frame transformation revolves around the strategic development, propagation, and appropriation of new meanings for existing objects, events, and actions (Goffman p.45; Benford and Snow 2000; Snow et al. 2015). Specifically, this section of the dissertation is concerned with the prominent social factors that contributed to the modders achieving a dominant voice in the community and how the pro-mod discourse began to attain notable influence within the field.   I use the concept of domain-specific frame transformation (Snow 2004) to highlight the way that social actors external to the field of CoD appropriated aspects of the emergent frames in the CoD community, and ultimately establish order by facilitating the dominance of the technophile frame (illustrated in the center of figure 5.1). I then close by underscoring the production of any quality in the field as an unintended consequence of the legitimation process.

According to Humphreys territorial legitimacy is the legitimacy granted to organizations and practices as a result of having a physical presence in the marketplace. Her research argues that territorial legitimacy plays a secondary role in normative legitimacy because once new practices or organizations are physically present they "permanently alter the type of discourse" surrounding the organization or practice (Humphreys 2010a, p. 503). The analysis of territorial legitimacy was twofold. In addition to netnographic analysis of community member interactions, media articles, advertisements, and other communications from companies that sold modified controllers were also included in the data corpus. Throughout the data community members continually acknowledge the growing availability of modified controllers in the marketplace. Comments such as the following contributed to the perceived legitimacy of this strategy.

> Doing some quick Ebay research before posting this, I can see controllers advertised with all other sorts of modifications such as an auto-drop shot feature, rapid fire, 'quickscope mode' and so forth. Do you consider players who use controllers such as these as 'cheaters'? (Horse - neoseeker.com forum)

Both modders and purists would make comments such as these but from relatively different points of view. Modders generally applaud the marketplace's support of this new way of competing in CoD while purists view it as a disappointing sign of the continued use of these controllers.

Private internet-based companies that specialize in serving this market also contribute heavily to notions of legitimacy as demonstrated in this excerpt from GamerModz.com's frequently asked questions section:

Can your controllers be detected on xbox live?

Our controller mods cannot be detected by Xbox Live HOWEVER we do not condone the use of modded controllers on Xbox Live due to the unfair advantage you may have over other opponents.

Is this controller modding service legal?

Absolutely. When purchasing from us, you are purchasing a "service" which is the pre-modification of a controller (the "controller" itself is free with the purchase of this service). We then mod an existing controller from our inventory and ship it to you already modded, and ready to go!

The language used here encourages the use of modified controllers in online competition by simultaneously minimizing the potential for social consequence and implicitly highlighting the benefits received. This company, and many others like it, operate as legitimate businesses advertising on popular websites, offering warranties and shipping with their service and so forth which all contributes to the legitimacy of the modified controller. Moreover, the presence of these companies supports the use and acceptance of modified controllers by leveraging loopholes in Microsoft's Terms of Use agreement (e.g., selling a "service" with a free controller).

Additionally, a recent featured article on the popular gaming site penny-arcade.com reveals an interesting decision regarding the use of certain modified controllers by Major League Gaming (MLG), an organization that presides over professional "electronic sports" and official gaming tournaments in the U.S. and Canada. The quotes below describes how and why MLG will disallow the use of certain standard game options in an upcoming CoD tournament, while allowing the continued use of ScuF brand modified controllers.

"Why would a weapon that is available to both teams need to be banned?

Yesterday, Major League Gaming announced they've decided to ban the FAL assault rifle from use in the qualifiers for the upcoming Call of Duty: Black Ops 2 competition at the MLG Spring Championship in Anaheim on June 28-30…

…Alex Rubens, game journalist and owner of eSportsUpdates.com, told me that when combined with a commonly used controller mod, the FAL was basically unstoppable when used by high-level players. These mods are called SCUF controllers, and come with two main features designed specifically for Call of Duty.

The FAL was a particularly deadly combination…said Rubens. "Every shot is direct on target and when it only takes two shots to kill even at long distances … the FAL can kill before other guns can get a shot off." …in the right hands, a dozen enemies could be killed without the need for a reload. Beyond that it also had great power and accuracy even when firing from the hip, which meant that it

could be even better in close range fights than weapons that were intended for close range battles…

The result was that players were essentially forced into using this gun over all others, and that makes the game pretty boring. And it's not super exciting when all players essentially have an instant death beam at their disposal…" (Groen 2013)

The article opens by acknowledging the contradictory nature of the weapon being banned. It then follows by explaining how the weapon is so powerful when combined with the use of a modified controller that all players are forced to use it, and it ultimately make the game "boring." There is a notable sense of ambivalence among those commenting on this article. Many individuals repeatedly questioned MLG's logic, generally asking "why not ban the controller instead of the gun?" Others defended the decision, as it seemed to justify their particular perspective on social value of controller modifications. Although MLG only has jurisdiction over tournaments and not the entire Call of Duty community, this territorial acknowledgement of the legitimacy of modified controllers gives merit to the overall legitimacy of modified controllers on a number of fronts. For those in the CoD community, activity such as this from respected organizations like MLG institutionalizes the legitimacy of modified controllers. They applied guidelines (regulative legitimacy) to mod use. They explicitly acknowledged that mod use does not constitute cheating (normative legitimacy). They also assume that modding is an ordinary strategy of action for the cultural elite (e.g., professional gamers) in the CoD community (cultural-cognitive legitimacy).

Overall, the legitimacy status of modified controllers is complicated by the notion that it is clearly not held in the same regard by all community members. For some, it is clearly "cheating" because it violates a moral code adhered to by "true" competitors and provides an unfair advantage while for others it is clearly just a new way of competing. Nevertheless, there is both explicit and implicit acknowledgement throughout the community about the commonality of modified controllers as well as the advantages they impart.

Inequality in the CoD Community - When Everybody, Wins We All Lose

However much debate there may about the legitimacy of mods, their presence does produce structural inequality within the community. Evidence from the data suggests that there have been disparate social consequences for the varied emergent strategies of action based on accessibility. That is, strategies of action can generally be thought of as appropriable or transformative. In the CoD community, new strategies are appropriated into an existing frame and social order when the resources necessary to employ them become available (e.g., new uses of the standard assortment of weapons). This is evident in the gradual incorporation of strategies like camping, dropshooting, or quickscoping into common competition practices. Or, strategies can have a transformative influence over the frame and social order when necessary resources are available to only a few or structural constraints exclude some members from taking advantage of alternative ways of competing (e.g., new weapons only available to a few players). This is evident in the discourse regarding the legitimacy of modified controllers.

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Transformative strategies of action disrupt the existing social order by introducing external inequality and changing access to symbolic capital. The stability of symbolic capital is important for both determining and expressing social standing within the CoD community hierarchy. This also has the potential to impact perceptions of the potential for upward mobility, which is important for community members.

In the data the distinction between the emergence of appropriable and transformative strategies of action become clear as comparisons are made between CoD community members' perceptions about dealing with the use of camping as a strategy versus their beliefs about dealing with the use of modified controllers. Although camping (an appropriable strategy of action) may carry a degree of stigma, it is by most accounts widely tolerated and has been accepted as a legitimate strategy. This is because community members have devised various ways of neutralizing any advantages gained by camping through their social interactions while competing in other forms of community communications as indicated in this exchange between two community members.

DTH Brigade: I don't know why you guys complain about campers. I always have a camper killer class [of weapons and gear]… my sniper camper kill class has smoke grenades, thermal scope, ninja pro, and cold blooded pro. Most sniper campers have stopping power, so I just throw smoke and wait for their glow to show up. Headshot.

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All to Atrophy: I can agree with DTH... kids who camp are just asking to get wrecked. Nuke boosters in MW2 FFA are my favorites.... free double kill every time :) If I need an extended mag challenge for a sniper, or any other weapon, I simply use sitrep and put FMJ with stopping power on the weapon, and occasionally a thermal as well if the map is large enough.

I have a fairly thorough system for dealing out booster justice, although I'll definitely give you props for the smoke grenade/thermal idea, I'll probably use that on a few maps in particular.

Here the community members exchange tactics for neutralizing "campers." For players that have acquired the necessary practical knowledge and have the skill to execute these tactics, camping ultimately becomes just another way to compete. Access to symbolic capital does not change because the resources mentioned in the above exchange (e.g., in-game weapons, tactical gear, and perks) are generally accessible for the majority of community members. "Campers" are dealt with using tactics that are relatively standardized within game when it is purchased. Hence, community members are generally willing to compete with and/or against "campers" without necessarily feeling "cheated." Once routinized, chances of success still come down to which player can most efficiently compete using the tactful assortment of the weapons and gear that come standardized with the game. Essentially, camping is appropriated into the existing set of strategies of action that constitute the practice of competing. The same can be said for other appropriable strategies like the dropshot or quickscoping.

An important distinction of transformative strategies of action, like using modified controllers, is the disparity in the resources required to compete. Modified controllers allow the user to compete in ways that surpass the game's structural constraints as explained in the excerpts below:

> I have seen an increasing number of people using their 200 dollar rapid-fire controllers to turn these average guns into absolute monsters…Of course, no person can normally press the button as such speed while aiming at the enemy. (Horse - neoseeker.com forum)

The first comment makes reference to the excessive price of modified controllers and their considerable performance enhancing power implying that players are able to purchase their talent. While there are a few that believe they can "out play" those with modified controllers, the general consensus among those who oppose the use of these controllers is that they should be banned. Whereas one could "deal with campers" by tactfully using the resources available within the game, the use of modified controllers however, produces structural constraints in the form of differential access to game-relevant economic resources and information asymmetry that were not present before their recent proliferation.

Constant references to price differences, availability in the marketplace, and how one attains access to modified controllers were instantiated by both supporters and critics of these devices. Purists generally allude to the idea that they have too much integrity to "purchase their honor." This much is evident in remarks such as "I just think it's sad folks feel it necessary to use turbo controllers over Live for an advantage… Find a setup that

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works for you and go to town rather then dropping $200 or whatnot on a 3rd party modded setup. Frak man, that money can buy a lot of beer!!" or "I refuse to spend the amount of money for a modded controller, and also I have to much pride to use one." Purists rely mainly on a moral discourse to justify their disposition on the growing structural inequality.

Modders, or would be modders, also acknowledge a growing disparity in the ability to compete that is directly associated with the use of modified controllers. This is demonstrated in a quote provided by an individual that admittedly wishes to improve his competitive ability through the purchase of one of these devices:

> Money + Technology = Advantage. These controllers aren't cheap.. although i've not done alot of searching. I confess I have been researching them because I really suck at this game. but I digress ... If the prices of the modified controllers came down to where anyone thinking of purchasing a new controller could choose either, would that make it an unfair advantage? (ClutteredMoldO – neoseeker.com forum)

This community member appears to have an egalitarian temperament and subtly suggests that if everyone could afford one of these controllers then that would be fair, implying that their use would be standardized and the inequalities produced by their emergence would be leveled. Information asymmetry has also produced inequalities in the community, particularly during earlier iterations of the game. This was prior to the existence companies such as Gamermodz, and the only way to procure a modified controller was to either know how to modify it yourself or have access to someone who

knew how to make controller modifications. Community members "in the know" would often make reference to instructional websites and videos available in various places on the internet.

In previous work, a shift from moral ideals to rational/economic ideals signals progression towards normative legitimacy (Humphrey 2010a). In the CoD empirical context, these same ideals, steeped in a technology discourse, serve to stagnate the development of a shared understanding and are allowed to exacerbate intracommunity differences. This activity ultimately forces the CoD community to restructure the social order.

Moreover, the increased presence of modified controllers has changed the way many community members view symbolic capital, whose social value had been traditionally stable. The value and meaning of social markers and rewards has been diminished for those who do not accept the mod as a legitimate means to these ends. The presence of modified controllers, among other modifications, has also raised the statistical expectations to a point where they are virtually unreachable if you do not play with a modified controller. Players would often lament about modified controllers "ruining the game." Traditional goals that were once hard to reach and only achieved by a few highly skilled competitors are now achievable by many with the use of modified controllers. For instance, some community member would explicitly state the diminished value of once prized accomplishments noting that "the leaderboards are completely useless due to the fact that over 50,000 people have gotten 10th [level of prestige] and all titles and emblems." Prestige, titles and emblems once signified elite status among all community members, yet now they are easily accessible to anyone with the economic

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means to acquire a modified controller. In another discussion forum on gamefaqs.com two Modders were "testing" the ability to rank up at a rate that would not be possible without the use of a mod. One respondent in particular wanted the "tester" to "let me know if you prestige" (e.g. reach one of the highest ranks) in a day.

CHAPTER 8

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Generally, this dissertation answers the call within consumer culture research to explore the mechanisms that inform community dynamics at various societal levels (Thomas, Price, and Schau 2013). In examining how contested practices attain legitimacy and how this process impacts community structure this work contributes to the consumer culture literature on community, practices, and legitimation processes in several important ways.

First, I develop theory on how contested practices emerge in loosely-organized communities that operate in environments that lack a clear dominant frame (i.e., liminal space) and offer a richer theoretical account of how the emergence of contested practices contributes to the formation of multiple collective frames. In contrast to previous studies, I rely on the relative absence of an effective regulative body in the CoD community to explore legitimation at the meso-societal level and develop a richer theoretical account of how conflicting perspectives of legitimate practice emerge in consumption communities. Here, the emergence of modified controllers is used to highlight and discuss the ambiguous nature of regulative authority in the field. I argue that regulative instability and ambiguity among consumers in this emergent field produce a state of liminality in the field and discuss the potential role of contested practices may play in producing order.

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Moreover, this research identifies mechanisms of socialization and social arrangements as sources of structural influence operating together in shaping consumers' perceptions of legitimate practice in emergent Call of Duty community. In particular, this work outlines how these mechanisms and sources of influence facilitate the production of purist and modder collective frames and their respective discourses through contestations over legitimacy. I show that when these mechanisms operate in a liminal context they are likely to produce multiple discourses regarding a focal cultural phenomenon. This combination of circumstances is the manner in which this particular necessary condition for cultural change (i.e., the presence of multiple discourses) is produced.

In the field of Call of Duty, with its diverse sets of actors and fairly finite set of social "rewards," producing a stable environment requires a sustainable system of meanings to govern social relations and day-to-day interactions. However, with limited external regulation in this field, governance becomes relatively endogenous to the CoD community and produces an environment where multiple, and at times opposing, interpretations of community practices may coexist. Thomas, Price and Schau (2013) show that such diverse consumption communities are held together, at least in part, by members' dependence on field-specific resources.

Previous studies have also shown that the presence of a discursive system, or shared community "ethos," is often necessary to effectively integrate these dispersed practices and meaningfully associate them with particular desired outcomes in a manner that satisfies the interests of the community as a whole (Arsel and Bean 2013; Kates

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2004). Consumption communities have the potential to be socializing structures where "preferences are often learned within a particular sphere of practice and their justifications have localized jurisdiction" (Warde 2005, p. 145).

Ideally, it should then follow that the complex nature of social interaction and competition within the Call of Duty community is bound together by a singular collective understanding that socially organizes, assigns meaning and value to both activities and objects, and provides moral order for the material and virtual CoD world. However, evidence from the data suggests that the CoD community sits in stark contrast to the stable environments highlighted in previous research, where members of a community rely on a regulative body to discern the appropriate sets of behaviors in the field. Although some research has shown that regulative institutions typically play a necessary role in for normative legitimacy to emerge in markets, emergent consumption communities like CoD are less stable than those previously studied (e.g., Humphreys 2010b). However, emergent consumption communities like CoD are less stable than those previously studied. They lack formal organization at the meso-societal level and thus the institutional capacity to forge broadly accepted notions of legitimacy in a similar manner to prior research. This dissertation demonstrates that legitimation in emergent consumption communities tends to be, at least initially, a dynamic and endogenous discursive process.

Another key theoretical contribution of this research is that it highlights the ways in which contested practices have the potential to influence social order through legitimation. While it is generally well accepted that discursive systems both "shape and are shaped by" the societies and cultures in which they exist (Crockett and Wallendorf

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2004, p. 512), the bulk of the existing empirical work in this area has been overly attentive to how structural aspects of consumption affect practice. The present work is more interested in how emergent practices affect structure, specifically social order within a consumption community.

The findings in this dissertation are akin to Sandikci and Ger's (2010) in that they show how new fashionable veiling practices were appropriated into an existing ideological framework based on both Islamic and western beliefs in order to represent class differences. In their work the stigmatized/legitimacy status of veiling was a function of the practitioners' collective social standing within Turkish consumer culture. The discourse that structures this practice was an a priori belief (i.e., Islam) in Turkey that essentially grows in normative influence and legitimacy as the symbolic manifestation of certain ideals (e.g., veiling) gains traction in society. It was relaxed strictures from social, religious, and political institutions that provided the opportunity to apply new meaning for fashion practices for Turkish women.

By contrast, this research offers a more meso-social account of social change in the Call of Duty consumption community. As CoD community members adopt new strategies of action to achieve existing forms of desired ends (e.g., higher rank) favorable external discourse is appropriated ad hoc by community members to alleviate the dissonance associated with the inequality produced by the use of a dominant technology (modified controllers). Purists and modders are not ideologues adopting the modified controller as a symbol of their commitment to an existing predisposition or previously held set of ideas. Rather, these are consumers using practices whose meaning and social significance has become increasingly ambiguous over time, who then take interest in, and

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appropriate, new frames that allow them to make sense of their changing environment. This process is not unlike what Weber ([1922] 1946) describes as an "elective affinity," or mutual attraction between certain ideas and societies, that sometimes emerges as collectives attempt to rationalize or justify their existing material conditions.

Also, this dissertation builds on the practice theory literature by offering a more nuanced conceptual retooling of the elements of practice model. Practices in the CoD Community consist of: material and virtual objects; cultural knowledge in the form of both competencies and strategies of action; symbolic capital; and a collective frame that organizes and governs social life the community by giving meaning and purpose to the other elements of practice. Whereas prior research has tended to conflate forms of cultural knowledge, this dissertation demonstrates the distinct role that both competencies and strategies of action play in how consumers understand and perform community practices.

Findings from this research also clarify the relationship between the legitimation of practices and frame transformation. Through frame transformation the meaning and social significance of contested practices is negotiated among community members, reinforced by institutional actors, and ultimately reframed as legitimate community practices that serve as the basis of cultural reproduction and the foundation of the social structure exhibited in established communities. To the knowledge of the author this work is also the first to call theoretical attention to the social consequences of legitimation in consumption communities. Specifically, this research underscores how the legitimation of practices transforms systems of social stratification and the pursuit of status in the field and produce community-specific forms of inequality. These findings also show how

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broad social factors like territorial legitimacy and institutional alliances tacitly influence CoD community members' beliefs about practical proficiency as well as their access to resources; and hence their ability to compete for status. Previous research has observed that the ability to compete for status across a number of social domains is at least partially determined by consumers' differential access to important social and economic resources (Bourdieu 1984; Holt 1998). Schau and colleagues also note that community membership and social standing is also impacted by one's ability to engage in the accumulation and exchange of "valorized resources" specific to the community (Schau, Muniz, and Arnould 2009, p. 35). Resources include those that aid in: the learning and development of understandings; acquiring knowledge of the appropriate procedures that govern practice; and ultimately, the acquisition of meaningful social markers valued by the community. Other beneficial resources may for instance be economic in nature.

The embodied manifestation of the frame during social interaction seems to be comprised of ad hoc justifications based on both (1) community members' a priori beliefs about regulation, distributive justice, meritocracy, and legitimacy, as well as (2) their interpretations of the normalcy of the observed behavior of others in competition. Yet, taken as a whole, the data evince a level of tacit shared understanding, which serves as a cultural resource for the entire Call of Duty consumption community. Cheating is wrong, and the community agrees to that, but what actually constitutes cheating is a contested set of baseline assumptions that community members either attempt to comply with or resist as they compete with one another.

Managerial Implications

From a managerial perspective, this research offers a more nuanced understanding of the complex and contentious nature of social life within consumption communities. Schau et al (2009) argue that firms should encourage the development of a broad array of practices, the findings here would suggest that allowing many practices to emerge in unstable heterogeneous environments may lead to tension and contestation over the legitimacy of practice in the community. Moreover, marketing managers should note that establishing community norms in consumption communities is at least initially an endogenous process. Thus, firms should exercise caution when attempting to regulate practices and/or influence understandings of legitimacy in consumption communities. Practitioners are at times better served allowing their regulative actions to follow those that emerge from the shared understandings within the community.

Building on prior studies that highlight the role of heterogeneity in consumption communities (Thomas, Price, and Schau 2013), the findings in this dissertation also suggest that firms exercise caution in their efforts to engage in the cocreation of value with consumption communities. Many macro-focused studies in consumer culture research necessarily treat entities in the market as homogenous sets of actors, describing marketplace interactions as dialectics between firms and consumers negotiating of meaning and legitimacy in the marketplace (e.g., Giesler 2007, 2012; Holt 2002) or sets or producers and consumers engaged in the cocreation of value (e.g., Schau et al 2009). This research argues that marketers would do well to be attentive to the degree of heterogeneity and tension that may exist among consumers at the level of community. Firms and other marketplace institutions interested in co-creating value or influencing

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shared understandings of meaning and legitimate practice in consumption communities should not take for granted the level of consensus or coherence in thought among community members. This work demonstrates that these interactions are often better perceived as engagements between firms and one or more powerful constituencies within consumption communities, each of which may have varied and, at times, opposing interests.

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