UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

# Making "Cents" of Subcultural Capital: The Preservation of Authenticity and Credibility in Penny Arcade Subculture

by

Bryanne Miller

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIRMENTS FOR

THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

GRADUATE PROGRAM IN COMMUNICATION STUDIES

CALGARY, ALBERTA

NOVEMBER, 2007

*Your file Votre référence*
*ISBN: 978-0-494-38120-5*
*Our file Notre référence*
*ISBN: 978-0-494-38120-5*

**Abstract**

Penny Arcade is a videogame web-comic and blog created by cartoonists Gabe and Tycho, and visited by roughly four million gamers a day. Penny Arcade's benchmark of authenticity is the unique gamer code and their specific style of relating to gamers. This thesis investigates Penny Arcade's special position within their field as both leaders of the gamer subculture and purveyors of economic capital. Specifically, this research attempts to answer the question: how are Penny Arcade able to remain authentic taste leaders and retain their credibility among gamers, while simultaneously promoting something as sub-culturally "uncool" as a children's charity? Drawing on subcultural theory and the work of Pierre Bourdieu, this thesis focuses its attention on the notion of subcultural capital and how it is a central unifying and strengthening force in Penny Arcade subculture. Penny Arcade's subcultural capital proves to transgress typical social-cultural boundaries, thereby allotting them success within both restricted and large-scale fields of production.

**Acknowledgements**

There are so many people who were integral to the shaping and writing process of this thesis. I would very much like to thank Dr. Dale Bradley and Dr. Maria Bakardjieva for sitting in on my examination committee and whose feedback was of tremendous value. Of course, thank you to Dr. Bart Beaty for supervising this work and for encouraging me to pursue this topic in the first place. Thank you to Dr. David Mitchell and Marion Hillier of the University of Calgary graduate program in Communication Studies for accommodating my unique circumstances.

I would also like to express my gratitude to all of those who participated in this work and volunteered their time to share their knowledge with me and those of you who were so willing to assist me throughout my research. To gamers everywhere, you people have large and gracious hearts and I thank you for letting me experience that.

My family and friends have been there from the start. Thank you to Constance O'Laughlin who encouraged me to pursue higher education by helping me to believe in myself. To Tali Schtelzer, Ian Miller, and Julia Beange – you three have been my pillars through the ups and downs. To Andrea Miller, Brendan Shearer, and Meeki Crotti – your love, support, and generosity I will be forever grateful for. My mother, Mona Troyer: There are not even words for how you have made so much of this possible and helped me become who I am today. My father Andrew and my step-mother Ardis Miller, thank you also for your endless encouragement. Thank you Wendy and Joe Schtelzer, for always opening your door to me. Last of all, I extend my gratitude to my grandparents, Dr. Ian and Hazel Miller, whose unconditional love always came with cookies and a warm cup of milky tea. Bless your hearts.

## Dedication

To Steven. Thank you.

**Table of Contents**

## List of Figures

# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

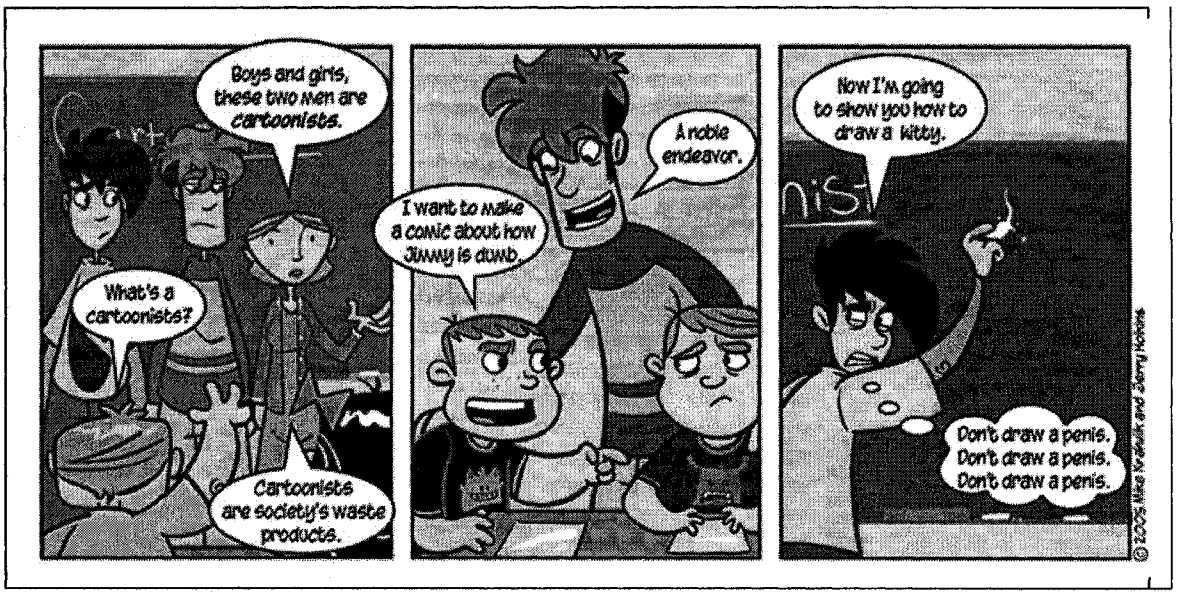


**Figure 1.1 "The Next Generation"(2005/06/17)**

Walking into the 2006 Penny Arcade Expo, the largest annual videogamer's convention in North America, was the equivalent of attending a Star Wars convention despite never having seen the movie. First off, I was not in possession of a Nintendo DS Lite, (the equivalent of the Star Wars light sabre), nor was I dressed as my favourite avatar, or in the alternative, jeans and a gamer t-shirt. Rather, I was standing in my jean skirt and platform sandals with my video camera in one hand, a folder-full of interview consent forms in the other, and an overwhelmed look on my face.

All around me, gamers congregated. Some lounged on the many bean-bag chairs lining the walls, while others stood in groups talking with their friends. Most of the gamers, however, stood in line outside of the big auditorium doors to get front row seats

to see the opening address given by the fathers of PAX and the makers of the number one gaming webcomic, Penny Arcade.

Penny Arcade began as two guys who liked to play videogames and write comics. As the above comic suggests, Mike Krahulik and Jerry Holkins attempted to establish themselves and be taken seriously as comic artists in the traditionally maligned field of comics. Forced to contend with the similarly positioned field of videogames, they struggled to make a living on just comics alone. Krahulik and Holkins held down fulltime jobs while they continued to play videogames and produce comics in their free time. After having their videogame webcomic rejected by numerous publishers, the team eventually got on with an online gaming magazine, which later led to the development of their own website, penny-arcade.com. The website functions as a videogame review site and industry watchdog, able to poke fun at such topics through the three panel comic strip that is linked to from an accompanying diatribe written by Holkins. As the writer, Holkins conveys a unique style through an impressive verbiage, whilst Krahulik articulates Holkins' blog via the web comic. The comic stars Gabe and Tycho Brahe, the alter-egos for Krahulik and Holkins respectively; the format takes a common formula: comment, response, witty retort. Their shoot-from-the-hip style and grassroots-gamer origins positioned Krahulik and Holkins as the authentic voice of gamers. As gamers themselves, their opinions are motivated by what is in the best interest for the gamer from a gamer's standpoint and not that of the gaming industry.

As a webcomic, the strip was available to a wide audience, but without the remuneration that would be enjoyed by a comic book artist with a similarly sized audience. Today, over four and a half million readers visit penny-arcade.com every

Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, to view the comic and read the accompanying newspost for a chuckle and to find out the latest on videogames, the gaming industry, and the surrounding politics. The two-part team now have a staff of ten, enough advertising revenue to sustain a comfortable living, as well as a children's charity named Child's Play.

As French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1993) postulated, within any field of cultural production there exists on one end, those within the restricted field who are governed by principles of "autonomy" or authenticity, and on the opposite end, those who are governed by "heteronomy" or economic incentives. The murkier areas of grey that exist between the two ends of the spectrum are not so easily summarized. In most cases, the decision to move away from the restricted field of cultural production comes with the sacrifice of authenticity on the part of the artist. Existing successfully in suspension between the restricted and large-scale fields of cultural production requires a calculated navigation between the preservation of authenticity and the accumulation of economic capital. It is this theoretical understanding that lends itself to this study, making comprehensible the workings of the Penny Arcade subculture from a cultural standpoint.

Penny Arcade's benchmark of authenticity is the unique gamer code and their specific style of relating to gamers. This thesis investigates Penny Arcade's unique position within the field as both leaders of the gamer subculture and purveyors of economic capital. Specifically, this research attempts to answer the question: how are Penny Arcade able to remain authentic taste leaders and retain their credibility among gamers, while simultaneously promoting something as sub-culturally "uncool" as a children's charity? Drawing on subcultural theory and the work of Pierre Bourdieu, this

thesis focuses its attention on the notion of subcultural capital and how it is a central unifying and strengthening force in the success of Penny Arcade.

Using a multi-method ethnography coupled with an analysis of the Penny Arcade website and surrounding discourse, this research surveys gamer culture and the Penny Arcade subculture from the perspective of Penny Arcade fans and within an industry context. It argues that Penny Arcade's charity was successful as a result of their strategic use of subcultural capital, which served to reinforce their subcultural identity and fan loyalty in the face of what otherwise could be perceived as selling out. My argument is advanced through three main chapters proceeding from this introduction.

Chapter 2 is a comprehensive literary and theoretical overview of some of the main bodies of work that structure and frame this study, tracing the evolution of cultural and subcultural studies to their modern-day application and how these fields will be applied in this study. This chapter also covers some important areas of overlap, such as fan studies, and other approaches to studying videogames and videogame cultures. The chapter wraps up with a brief discussion of the research methodology used and the phenomenological reasoning behind this.

Chapter 3 is a deeper exploration of the concept of subculture, paying particular attention to the specific subculture of Penny Arcade itself. Using subcultural theorist Paul Hodkinson's (2002) working concept of "subculture," and drawing on empirical data, Chapter 3 connects the dots as to how and why Penny Arcade can be considered a subculture in these terms. Following this, the chapter discusses the intricacies of the group's subcultural capital, specifically its unique features and the unifying role it plays in proliferating membership loyalty and feelings of identity. Some of Penny Arcade's

actions that are demonstrative of their adversarial nature have been included in this section, as well as the manner in which they legitimize the economic capital that they receive from onsite advertising revenue.

The final chapter expands on the theory and groundwork laid in the previous chapters, but focuses explicitly on the starting up of Child's Play, and how this action is unusual given Penny Arcade's presupposed position in the field. By applying a Bourdieu-ian analysis on philanthropy, this chapter investigates how Penny Arcade is able to accrue economic and social capital in the larger field of production and yet continue to maintain and develop their positions of authenticity and credibility among members of the Penny Arcade subculture. Ultimately, I argue that this balancing act is made possible because of the utilization of Penny Arcade's subcultural capital. The success of this endeavour is a testament to the durability and tenacity of this particular subculture, the study of which will hopefully draw awareness to the importance of subcultural capital in facilitating the negotiation of the volatile positioning between the restricted and large-scale fields of production.

# CHAPTER 2: THEORY, METHODS, AND MADNESS

Since the breakthrough work of Dick Hebdige in his book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1970), scholars have sought to explain, understand, and pigeonhole subcultures to uncover the universal code that underlies each one. This generic approach to subcultures is generally rejected in favour of a more flexible and individualistic model, as it has since been thought that the study of subcultures is best tackled on a case-by-case basis. This holds true when considering the cultural sphere of Penny Arcade. Penny Arcade has created a subculture of followers who congregate from a combination of videogame and comic book backgrounds. This chapter will trace the historical trajectory of cultural and subcultural theory and situate this study amongst the wide range of existing approaches, including post-subcultural theory and fan studies. It will also provide an excursus on the politics of cultural production and explore key terms such as authenticity and subcultural capital, and will finish with a brief look at the methodology used in this study. It is only with a thorough exploration of the theoretical climate that tempers this research that the cultural dynamics surrounding the Penny Arcade subculture can be fully comprehended.

## Early Origins: From Chicago to Frankfurt

To understand post-subcultural theory as we know it, the origins of subcultural theory must be properly examined. The concept of a subculture, and thus of subcultural studies, began with the writings of Robert Park, one of the most significant sociologists of the early twentieth century, and proceeded to grow out of the work of Adorno and

others of the Frankfurt school in Germany. Park's work was a call to the intrigue of cities as an object of study, and an attempt to make sense of inner city life and human integration in this regard. He looked at units of congregation in terms of deviance, which became an important concept nearly 50 years later, when picked up by members of the Birmingham school.

According to Park and his colleague Burgess (1969), society was an extension of a community, in that societies had established an assimilation of processes in dealing with conflict between and amongst smaller community groups. Once this method of reconciliation became understood, communities were brought together accordingly. Park (1955) likened this process to an organism:

> On the whole, the social group behaves like an organism, and the differences between groups may be described in terms of the action-pattern which determines the behaviour of each. The fundamental difference between a city and a village, from the point of view of sociology, is not the mere size of the aggregates or the number of individuals of which they are composed, but the degree to which these different aggregates have been integrated and organized for concerted action . . . The thing that gives a community the character of a society is not its structure, but its capacity for concerted action. (14)

The institutionalization of this concerted action solidified the customs and traditions of a community that ultimately became those of society. Human society differed from animal societies because of language, which reflected a "conscious community of purpose" and facilitated "mores and formal standards of conduct" (Park & Burgess, 1969, 101), thus enabling the aforementioned institutionalization.

Even the individual, in the context of the city, behaved in accordance with the established mandate:

> The consequence is that the individual of society lives a more or less public existence, in which all his acts are anticipated, checked, inhibited, or modified by the gestures and the intentions of his fellows. It is in this social conflict, in which every individual lives more or less in the mind of every other individual, that human nature and the individual may acquire their most characteristic and human traits. (Park, 1955, 18)

As a result, the individual ran the risk of confusing his or her private identity with the expectations of one's public identity set forth by society. With this understanding the rise of social groups, as Park understood them, came into being.

As Park took his initial understandings of society further into the investigation of cities, the notion of "social groups" began to arise. Initially, social groups were perceived by Park as directly related to division of labour, moral or intellectual commonalities, and geographic proximity. Division of labour, first of all, had the power to create interdependence in and among workers: "A social organization is thus created in which the individual becomes increasingly dependent upon the community of which he is an integral part" (Park, 2005, 29). There were also "moral regions" which had the ability to bring together people at a fundamental, and therefore more cohesive, level. These regions would attract people through a passion or interest "that has its roots directly in the original nature of the individual" (Park, 2005, 33-34). Though it was thought to be mostly eccentrics who participated in moral regions, according to Park, these groups were a normal component of city life. People within geographic proximity came to form neighbourhoods, which were simply another venue for the manifestation and practice of the sentiments and processes established by the city.

For Park (1955, 1969, 2005), the city was a place of variety, a place of extremes. As he once wrote, "The city, in short, shows the good and evil in human nature in excess" (Park, 2005, 35). Park and his contemporaries "employed the concept of subculture to investigate non-normative, non-mainstream, deviant, marginalized, minority, class, racial, criminal, unemployed, 'underdog' groups within their social milieu" (Jenks, 2005, 121). In discussing the habitual congregation of people, be it by a shared social perspective, attitude, vocation, or neighbourhood, Park was laying the groundwork for subcultural theorists to come.

Park had dropped the subcultural thread in the early 1920s; it wasn't until years later that scholars within the discipline of cultural studies picked it back up to weave the fabric of subcultural studies as it is today. Society, particularly mass culture, continued to be discussed in the years to come, notably by members of the Frankfurt school.

The Frankfurt school, also known as the Institute for Social Research, was rooted in Marxist thought. One member, Theodor Adorno, carried these Marxist undercurrents over to mass culture, or what is now regarded as popular culture. Adorno viewed popular culture as a subjugation of the masses, blurring and undermining the difference between high and low art and transforming culture into a commodity that was sold and monotonously and complacently consumed (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1999). He called the production and delivery of this type of content the "culture industry," by which the dominant ideology permeated a passive yet absorbed audience:

> The culture industry fuses old and familiar into a new quality. In all its branches, products which are tailored for consumption by masses and which to a great extent determine the nature of that consumption, are manufactured more or less according to plan . . . The culture industry

> intentionally integrates its consumers from above. To the detriment of both it forces together the spheres of high and low art, separated for thousands of years. (Adorno, 1991, 98)

Mass culture was maliciously manipulating the population, removing the appreciation of "art for art's sake" as well as impeding the ability of forms of low art to fulfill their traditional roles as a vehicle of expression for the underdog. Culture had gradually and inadvertently renounced its historic position and in doing so was subsumed by the powers that be as a means for control. This change was so gradual and so subtle, that when the otherwise innocent intent of culture was replaced with the intent to sell, an insatiable taste for the consumption of products and the ideals they represented soon followed:

> Just as works become commodities and are enjoyed as such, the commodity itself in consumer society has become image, representation, spectacle. Use value has been replaced by packaging and advertising. The commodification of art ends up in the aestheticization of the commodity. The siren song of the commodity has displaced the promise de bonheur once held by bourgeois art, and consumer Odysseus blissfully plunges into the sea of commodities, hoping to find gratification but finding none. (Adorno, 1991, 24)

Among Adorno's cynical but valuable contributions to cultural studies are his writings on the music industry. He was one of the first to discuss music as an industry, and in doing so, laid the groundwork for the articulation of authenticity that followed. The music industry can be viewed as a microcosm of the workings of the overall culture industry in terms of the commodification and consumption of culture. For Adorno (1991), music was a transitory form of culture that worked to sell the dominant ideology to its listeners over and over again. Music, which once used to rebel against convention,

became a purveyor of it. Music's mass appeal and widespread popularity coupled with simple and forgettable song lyrics and "hit lines" contributed to the short attention span of the population; a short attention span meant an increase in consumption. The result was deconcentration, which Adorno (1991) defined as "the perceptual activity which prepares the way for the forgetting and sudden recognition of mass music" (Adorno, 1991, 49). Not only could the music industry profit as an industry, but the dominant ideology profited successfully alongside it: "The representatives of the opposition to the authoritative schema become witnesses to the authority of commercial success" (Adorno, 1991, 32). Music officially became just another cultural tool used to advertise itself, along with a generic identity represented in style and the mass conformity to it. As will be demonstrated, this had huge bearings on subcultural notions of authenticity.

Adorno (1991) offered little hope for the culture industry as a whole. By blending the commercial and the cultural with the ideological, the industry lost its own identity.

> Cultural entities typical of the culture industry are no longer also commodities, they are commodities through and through. This quantitative shift is so great that it calls forth entirely new phenomena. Ultimately, the culture industry no longer even needs to directly pursue everywhere the profit interests from which it originated. These interests have become objectified in its ideology and have even made themselves independent of the compulsion to sell the cultural commodities which must be swallowed anyway. (100)

In the context of subcultures, this pessimistic view of a monopolistic mass culture was relieved by the post-war movement in Britain, led by Hall, Williams, and Thompson, who revived the discipline of cultural studies and placed it in a sometimes anthropological and often artistic framework. In continuing to examine the underlying

structures of power at work in mass culture, the underdog was returned the voice that Adorno insisted was forever swallowed up by his culture industry.

**Cultural Studies: A discipline is born**

Whereas Park in America had pioneered the study of deviance in groups and society and Adorno in Germany had looked at mass culture and hegemony, members of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham took a combined approach, giving birth to studies in popular culture. This movement challenged the aforementioned structuralist approaches that held mass media as a hegemonic force, spoon-feeding ideology to the masses. Instead, the important role of the working-class culture as a fully functioning interpretative body was acknowledged, introducing the concept of agency. Consequently, and more relevant to the birth of cultural studies and later, subcultural studies, the CCCS raised questions around individual and group identity and the dynamics governing groups that chose to separate themselves from mainstream society.

The CCCS can be seen as responsible for defining the discipline of "cultural studies," particularly thanks to the early works of E.P. Thompson, Raymond Williams, and Stuart Hall. Idealistic notions of culture, as established much earlier by Matthew Arnold (2006), asserted that culture was something that needed to be aspired to, thus making the world a better place; accordingly, culture was "high culture" because it contained within it the best the world had to offer. Members of the CCCS re-evaluated this idea within a Marxist framework.

Thompson's contribution came with his work on the historical working class, seeking to distinguish between the "Patricians and the Plebs" and to "de-code [the] behaviour and its symbolic modes of expression and to disclose invisible rules [of the working class] unlike those which a historian of subsequent working-class movements has come to expect" (Thompson, 1991, 11). As can be garnered from this quote, culture and class struggle necessarily co-existed, for it was within culture that potential working-class uprisings were fostered. For culture to exist, Thompson posited that it can only be examined against something else that is "not culture" (Peck, 2001). This line of thinking gave birth to the concept of distinction and the "us versus them" logic that became so central to notions of the cultural-political economy.

Similarly Williams, a fellow culturalist, conceived of culture as something that wove together the fabric of society; in his essay, "Culture is Ordinary" (Williams, 1997), Williams explained

> The Marxist interpretation of culture can never be accepted while it retains, as it need not retain, this directive element, this insistence that if you honestly want socialism you must write, think, learn in certain prescribed ways. A culture is common meanings, the product of a whole people, and offered individual meanings, the product of a man's whole committed personal and social experience. It is stupid and arrogant to suppose that any of these meanings can in any way be prescribed; they are made by living, made and remade, in ways we cannot know in advance. (9)

Like Thompson, Williams turned to the working-class to extrapolate the concept of culture, imparting the working-class with the power to direct the system of cultural production, instead of the long-held Marxist notion that the means of production were controlled by the upper and middle classes. Williams brought culture back down from

where it was previously thought to reside, secured within the clutches of the upper class and its so-called "high art" status: "We use the word culture in these two senses: to mean a whole way of life – the common meanings; to mean the arts and learning – the special processes of discovery and creative effort" (Williams in Miraglia et al., 1999). In looking for meaning in the recreation and lifestyle of working-class culture, Williams brought the significance of popular culture (culture for the masses) into the field of cultural studies.

It was Hall who later identified the two main branches of cultural studies: the structuralist approach coming out of the Frankfurt School, and the culturalist approach coming out of the Birmingham school. He called these the "two paradigms" whereby in culturalism, "the stress is placed on the *making* of culture rather than on its determined conditions" and in structuralism "the stress is placed on the specific nature of those supposedly irreducible formal properties which characterize the structure of different types of signifying practice and distinguish one from another" (Hall in Jenks, 2005, 110). According to Jenks (2005), Hall reconciled these two approaches within the CCCS through the concept of *hegemony,* which blunted the extremes existing within the structure vs. agency battle. Though Hall gave credence to both these paradigms, in the later years of the CCCS, he favoured the structuralist approach, seeing value in its emphasis on language and signification (Peck, 2001). In this sense, meaning was not just found in language, but in the codes surrounding language within the context of the wider culture.

**Subcultural Beginnings: Youth, Resistance and Style**

As cultural studies got its foothold, subcultural theory was gradually establishing itself. Father of cultural studies Stuart Hall, along with notables Tony Jefferson and Dick Hebdige, worked to expand the narrow focus of previous subculture work centered in Marxist working-class themes. At first, subcultures were associated directly with male youth. As Jenks (2005) observed, "The whole Birmingham CCCS tradition however, seemed largely content to restrict the idea of subculture to the pastime and possession of youth, and for some of its indigenous critics, mostly male youth" (5). The CCCS folk took into consideration the historical and social contexts from which subcultures sprang, which was a refreshing relief from the structuralist approaches of the past.

In the first anthology dedicated entirely to the study of subcultures, *Resistance Through Rituals* (Hall & Jefferson, 1976) set out to identify the common identifying traits of subcultures and included some of the first ethnographies on subcultures to date. In the opening introduction, Clarke et al. (1975) attempted to define subcultures in a class conscious way:

> In modern societies, the most fundamental groups are the social classes, and the major cultural configurations will be, in a fundamental though often mediated way, "class cultures." Relative to these cultural-class configurations, sub-cultures are sub-sets -- smaller, more localised and differentiated structures, within one or other of the larger cultural networks. (13)

From this working definition, subcultures were brought out from under the working-class stipulation and expanded to include other classes as well, namely the middle-class. Though subcultures were still associated with youth, the precondition of class was reconsidered (and therefore so was the assumption that youth equated social

change), as interest in middle-class subcultures manifested in the various ethnographic studies that ensued. Subcultures were given social spaces, territories from which they could exist. Subcultures participated in special activities that were unique to their group. But most importantly, subcultures were "identifiable social formations constructed as a collective response to the material and situated experience of their class" (Clarke et al., 1975, 47). How were subcultures identifiable? The answer was style. Instead of style for style's sake, as it came to be in later subcultural theory, style in this earlier context served a much more vital part in facilitating what was thought to be the underlying function of youth subcultures:

> The question of style, indeed, of generational style, is pivotal to the post-war formation of these youth sub-cultures...What concerns us here is, first, how "class" and "generational" elements interact together in the production of distinctive group-styles; second, how the material available to the group are constructed and appropriated in the form of a visibly organised cultural response. (Clarke et al., 1975, 57)

However, style was not just to be seen as an aesthetic characteristic of youth subcultures: enter Dick Hebdige. All too important for Hebdige (1979) was the way in which subcultures expressed themselves in a unique style, particularly in terms of fashion and outward appearance that served to mark an individual as belonging to a certain group. Yet for Hebdige (1979), the style of a subculture was an inadvertent means of challenging the hegemonic forces in society:

> The challenge to hegemony which subcultures represent is not issued directly by them. Rather it is expressed obliquely, in style. The objections are lodged, the contradictions displayed . . . at the profoundly superficial level of appearances: that is, at the level of signs. (17)

The goal of studying these groups is "to discern the hidden messages inscribed in code on the glossy surfaces of style, to trace them out as 'maps of meaning' which obscurely re-present the very contradictions they are designed to resolve or conceal" (Hebdige, 1979, 18). According to Hebdige, subcultures were subordinate groups "who are alternately dismissed, denounced and canonized; treated at different times as threats to public order and as harmless buffoons" (Hebdige, 1979, 2). The members of a subculture represent a "symbolic fit between values and the lifestyle of the group" (ibid., 2). Hebdige's observations of youth subcultures at the time (groups like punks, mods, and teddys, to name a few) was a precursor to the counter-culture nature of subcultures which were expanded on in later "us verses them" subcultural portrayals (Bennett, 2004; Gelder, 2005; Hebdige, 1988; Hodkinson, 2002; Thornton, 1996). As well, he was sure to draw on his culturalist roots and emphasize the importance of considering "the larger social, political and economic contexts" in order to capture the complete picture of any given subculture. Like the work of Hall and Jefferson, Hebdige's understanding of subcultures has since been replaced by more inclusive definitions, yet his identification of subcultural codes remains an important feature of work in this field, and will serve as a starting point for the unravelling of the subcultural code that threads together the Penny Arcade subculture.

**Post-Subcultural Theory**

On the surface, there appears to be an obvious fit between gamers and subculture in the sense that gamers are characterized as a group separate from mainstream society. Gamers are often perceived as nerds who remove themselves from social interaction in

favour of videogames and computers. As defined by the *New Hacker's Dictionary*, a geek is someone "who fulfills all the dreariest negative stereotypes about hackers: an antisocial, malodorous, pasty faced monomaniac with all the personality of a cheese grater"(in Feineman, 2005, 11). Hebdige's observation that subcultures are "denounced and dismissed" is consistent with the socially constructed attitude that is projected towards gamers in general. And one could hardly argue that gamers don't have their own "style," subtle though it may be. Whether this style is represented by the socially constructed image of a nerd in glasses wearing a pair of old jeans and a gaming t-shirt, it is fair to argue that gamers are thought to project a certain look, and that this look is often marketed by the industry through organizations like Think Geek (a gaming merchandise website) and even Penny Arcade themselves, as will be discussed in the pages to follow.

When exploring Hebdige's definition on a deeper level, the fit between gamers as a subculture becomes problematic. Hebdige's assertion, that subcultures are members of the subordinate class and his emphasis on style as a method subcultures use to express their defiance against the dominant class, does not apply to gamers. For the most part, gamers are of middle- to upper-class socio-economic status though their lifestyles may be modest in lavishness or material terms, gaming requires a certain level of disposable income.

To reconcile this identified incongruity with the application of Hebdige's definition of subculture, the work of post-subculture theorist David Muggleton can be usefully applied. Muggleton's book, *Inside Subculture* (2000) helps to expand the originally narrow definition of subculture through his work on post-subculture theory. Muggleton makes a break with Hebdige and other like-minded theorists in re-evaluating

the role that class has in determining one's membership in a given subculture. Muggleton considers subcultures to be more akin to "lifestyle groupings" joined through the sharing of "attitudes and values, consumption practices and various leisure activities" (Muggleton, 2000, 30). As such, this permits "that youths from different class backgrounds can hold similar values that find their expression in shared membership of a particular subculture" (ibid., 31). This "individualizing" of subcultures shelved Hebdige's view of a subculture as being one's sole identity directly linked to social status. Gamers who meet online to play MMORPGs (massive multi-player online role-playing games) or view the latest Penny Arcade blog or comic can connect from any socio-economic position so long as they have access to the Internet. No longer are groups clearly defined; the post-modern approach to subcultures sees "group identification in individualistic terms" (Muggleton, 2000, 59).

This is not to say that all proponents of subcultural studies agree with Muggleton's stance, nor that his position has become the dominant academic approach to research in this area. As Gelder (2005) unabashedly points out,

> The post-subcultures model turns away from a sense of subcultures as distinctive groups; but as it abandons subculture to "lifestyle" and atomized individuality, it paradoxically ends up underwriting *only* the "unspectacular": as if social difference is now so fragmented and diffuse that the very notion of it has effectively dissolved away. (14)

Gelder's point serves to illustrate the on-going tension that exists between identifying with and simply participating in a given group or community. It is not within the scope of this thesis to attempt to resolve this persisting anxiety, but suffice it to say that when looking at gamers, both post-subcultural theory and its counter theories have a

place. A gamer may have a full-time job, a family, or any other number of commitments which play a role in her identity. But while engaged in the activity of gaming or at a physical event where gamers gather (such as the annual Penny Arcade Expo), it is evident that a "social difference" exists. This social difference is highlighted by a subcultural code unique to Penny Arcade fans and is played out again and again as Penny Arcade gamers use it to prove themselves as "authentic" members of the Penny Arcade subculture and strengthen their identity as such.

Accordingly, I have adopted the use of the term "subculture" that was put forth by Paul Hodkinson (2002) in his study of the Goth subculture. To put an end to this post-subculture versus traditional subculture debate, he argues that subcultures consist of a measure of four following forms of "cultural substance": identity, commitment, consistent distinctiveness, and autonomy. Identity refers to "the extent to which participants hold a perception that they are involved in a distinct cultural grouping and share feelings of identity with one another" (30-31); commitment is "concentrated and continuous practical involvement among participants" (31); consistent distinctiveness is meant to be "the existence of a set of shared tastes and values which is distinctive from those of other groups and reasonably consistent" (30); and finally, a level of autonomy is maintained in that "a good proportion of the productive or organizational activities which underpin it are liable to be undertaken by and for enthusiasts" (32). As will be examined in a later chapter, Penny Arcade's followers meet all of these criteria and thus are considered a subculture in accordance with this definition.

**Bourdieu and the Cultural Economy**

Because subcultures don't exist within a vacuum, as Hebdige acknowledged, it is necessary to take a slight pedagogical deviation and examine the surrounding social, political, and economic landscape influencing subcultural dynamics. This landscape, in theoretical terms, is best explained by the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Within any cultural venture, there is an intricate system of exchange that facilitates and regulates membership, "taste," distribution of capital and social positioning within an industry. This struggle for power takes place within a social space referred to by Bourdieu as a field. Bourdieu (1985) defines the social field as follows:

> The social field can be described as a multi-dimensional space of positions such that every actual position can be defined in terms of a multi-dimensional system of co-ordinates whose values correspond to the values of the different pertinent variables. Thus, agents are distributed within it, in the first dimension, according to the overall volume of the capital they possess and, in the second dimension, according to the composition of their capital. (724)

Bourdieu's concept of capital contributes significantly to the understanding of subculture in and of itself, and as part of a wider social milieu, representing the fundamental powers that determine positions and position-takings within a field. In Bourdieu's words, "these fundamental powers are economic capital (in its different forms), cultural capital, social capital, and symbolic capital, which is the form that the various species of capital assume when they are perceived and recognized as legitimate" (Bourdieu, 1986, 17). Thornton (1996) most clearly explains the Bourdieuian concept of capital:

> Bourdieu writes extensively about what he calls cultural capital or knowledge that is accumulated through upbringing and education which confers social status.

> Cultural capital is the linchpin of a system of distinction in which cultural hierarchies correspond to social ones and people's tastes are predominantly a marker of class… [Bourdieu's] theoretical framework even includes discussion of a third category – social capital – which stems not so much from what you know as who you know (and who knows you). (10)

The accumulation of the different types of capital can take place within two fields of production: the restricted field of cultural production (production for producers: authentic), and the large-scale field of production (production for the masses: selling out) (Bourdieu in Stahl, 2003). Penny Arcade can be considered its own field, comprised of gaming, comic, and web-comic subfields. The concepts of restricted and large-scale fields of production will be relevant in seeking to understand how Penny Arcade remains authentic within its restricted field despite its pursuit of economic and social capital in the large-scale field; this can be explained as a result of an established symbolic capital within the restricted field among its fan-base.

**Subcultural Capital and the Search for Authenticity**

The work of Sarah Thornton's (1996) *Club Cultures* addresses the use of authenticity within subcultures by examining the notions of shared and different tastes across groups. Thornton looks specifically at the formation and definition of identity within the rave and club culture in Britain, and how group authenticity is achieved through a logic of distinction used to separate a subculture from the mainstream. Thornton saw her club subculture defined using some of the following negations:

| US | THEM |
|---|---|
| **Alternative** | Mainstream |
| Hip/cool | Straight/square/naff |
| **Independent** | Commercial |
| **Authentic** | False/phoney |
| **Insider knowledge** | Easily accessible information |
| **Minority** | Majority |
| Heterogeneous | Homogeneous |
| **Masculine Culture** | Feminine Culture |

(Thornton, 1996, 115)

These points of contrast are similarly shared by the Penny Arcade subculture, with the traits that specifically apply in bold type. Whether these traits can be considered common to subcultures in general is uncertain, but Thornton's list of distinctions helps to identify the common traits of the Penny Arcade subculture which contribute to the unconscious sense of identity felt by its members. Thornton's focus rested on the differentiation of hip, or "being in the know" versus being part of the mainstream. This requires insider knowledge and an intuitive navigation of rave subculture that only an authentic member would know, and is a defining characteristic and a tool of cohesion for Penny Arcade. Muggleton (2000) termed this "distinctive individuality" in reference to the way that subculturists highlight their individuality through a distinction from a collective reference group (63).

The notion of hip was first developed by Norman Mailer and his study of African-American culture. Central to Mailer's work was the idea that the black "hipster" existed in a codified world and viewed himself or herself as "an elite with the potential ruthlessness of an elite" (Mailer, 1959, 343), with a special hip language that "cannot

really be taught – if one shares none of the experiences of elation and exhaustion which it is equipped to describe, then it seems merely arch or vulgar or irritating" (ibid., 348). The advantage to being cool was to be equipped, because "if you are equipped it is more difficult for the next cat who comes along to put you down" (ibid., 352). In other words, to possess the insider knowledge and gain acceptability not only protected one from being rejected by the group, but it also protected the group from outsider judgement which could easily be written off as "mainstream." This form of protection is useful for a gaming subculture subject to social misconceptions and negative media portrayals as a way of keeping that sort of scrutiny out. In addition, hip was about authenticity. Much like Bourdieu's (1977) notion of habitus, being authentically hip was about internalizing hip, making it a subconscious by-product of one's everyday behaviour. As Leland (2004) comments:

> Within hip's juggernaut is a quest for the real, a belief that enlightenment involves stripping away sophistication, not adding it. This is the wisdom of Mailer's wise primitive, or of Kerouac typing madly at a roll of teletype paper, claiming no revisions. Hip promises truth received, not constructed. It belongs to the gnostic or visionary tradition. (53)

As Leland also notes, Mailer was one of the first to write about the notions of "cool" and the exclusivity that authenticated it, and so it is this idea of "hip" that provides the groundwork for the following investigation into subcultural capital and authenticity.

In fact, it was likely as much Mailer as Bourdieu that inspired Thornton's concept of "subcultural capital." This refers to knowledge of the special code of a given subculture, proving the validity of one's membership. In club culture terms, "just as cultural capital is personified in 'good' manners and urbane conversation, so subcultural

capital is embodied in the form of being 'in the know', using (but not over-using) current slang and looking as if you were born to perform the latest dance styles" (Thornton, 1996, 11-12). Subcultural capital is an intuitive navigation of the codes inherent within the subculture itself.

In this discussion of subcultural identity, Bourdieu's work *Distinction* (1984) deserves mention. Here, he spoke about the coming together of groups on the basis of "common properties" (Bourdieu, 1986, 16). Using distinction, groups exist in a habitus or field of possible position-takings. Groups "are immediately perceived as such only by those agents who possess the code, the classificatory schemes necessary to understand their social meaning" (ibid., 19). Here again is the notion of that special code that sets subcultures apart from "the rest," as was seen in Thornton's polarization and Hebdige's observations. As will be demonstrated, the correct utilization of this code enabled Penny Arcade to cross-over to the mainstream in pursuit of economic and social capital.

The application of authenticity as a concept governing cultural politics was pivotal to the earlier studies of music and music culture (as per Adorno), and this starting place still serves as the best example as to how authenticity operates within a restricted field of cultural production. From Keightley (2001), who looked at authenticity within the rock genre, to Hesmondhalgh (1999), who examined the preservation of authenticity within the indie (independent) music scene, authenticity is a meaningful construct in solidifying subcultural identity. But as Grazian (2003) points out in his search for authenticity in the Chicago blues scene, authenticity is extremely hard to pinpoint:

> What is authenticity? Broadly speaking, the notion of authenticity suggests two separate but related attributes. First, it can refer to the ability of a place or event to

> conform to an idealized representation of reality: that is, to a set of experiences regarding how such a thing ought to look, sound, and feel. At the same time, authenticity can refer to the credibility or sincerity of a performance and its ability to come off as natural and effortless. (10)

When looking at the cultural politics of the music scene, authenticity connotes a sense of identity rooted in a sort of grassroots independence. The term "authentic" can be traced back to ancient Greece, where it originally referred to the "self-made":

> The "self-made" can stand against the mass-produced, money-driven, anonymous and alienating aspects of modern life. In this context, rock's search for authenticity underlines a general anxiety about the status of the modern self. Musical experiences considered "authentic" are thus those which highlight or nourish individual identity, or signal affinities with the small communities and subcultures which sustain that identity. (Keightley, 2001, 134)

Within this definition there is a privileging of identity and a requirement of the inner knowledge that constitutes what a given identity is; this need to be "in the know" is embodied in the concept of subcultural capital.

Like rock, indie music also possesses, if not more so, this same tendency. According to Hesmondhalgh (1999), indie music is anti-mainstream in nature, and is characterized by being "independent" in its production and distribution. In indie terms, signing onto a major label is the fastest way to loose your indie following to the irreverent act of "selling out." However, Hesmondhalgh notes an interesting exception to this dynamic in a couple of case studies he did on two indie bands, both of whom signed on to major labels while simultaneously retaining their authenticity in the eyes of their fans. These exceptions are noteworthy in the context of Penny Arcade, who also retained their authenticity (i.e., the loyalty of its following) despite actions that otherwise would

have been considered as selling out in the context of this aforementioned subcultural dynamic. When renowned indie artists turned to mainstream methods of advertising, as did Penny Arcade (to be discussed later), Hesmondhalgh (1999) accounts for this in the following way:

> In both major and independent companies there is a stressful continuum between leisure time and work . . .Another problem is that of negotiating between the constant threat of bankruptcy and a strong resistance to "selling-out" to majors, or even to "straight" companies (those supposedly motivated neither by love of music, nor by politics). (42)

Under such trying circumstances, it is almost impossible for a widely regarded icon in an influential position not to garner the sympathies of its following. At the end of the day, fans understand that said musician or web-comics artist ultimately needs to make a living, and the condoning of this is hardly viewed as a concession to big industry. As will be seen, there are other ways of maintaining independence and corresponding authenticity; in fact, the strength of one's loyalty is often relayed in the strength of his or her subcultural capital.

Thornton's concept of subcultural capital is an important contribution to subcultural studies as a current and relevant form of subcultural currency; however, in discussing this, she fails to address the cultural-political implications of subcultural capital and how subcultural capital can be deliberately and strategically utilized as a tool to retain member loyalty. This study will embark on this discussion to demonstrate how the correct utilization of subcultural capital can work to preserve a subculture's authenticity in the face of profit and publicity seeking behaviours.

**Fan Cultures**

Up to this point, Penny Arcade gamers have been identified as a subculture, but there are some other approaches that must be acknowledged before holding to this classification. These include fan studies and other streams of research on videogames and its surrounding culture.

There is an ambiguous overlap of subcultures with fan cultures, a sub-discipline of subcultural studies. Because Penny Arcade could be situated somewhere within this ambiguity, it is important to acknowledge fan studies here in order to recognize some of its more useful contributions, from its origins to its application in the context of gamers. Fan theorists continually draw upon the work of subcultural studies and in some cases, use the terms "fan culture" and "subculture" interchangeably (Hills, 2002; Jenkins, 1992; Sandvoss, 2005). Interestingly enough, there appears little need within the discipline to clarify between the two; as such, it is important that fan cultures be considered here.

Cornel Sandvoss (2005) defines fandom as "*the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text*" (his italics) (8). This definition builds on the earlier work of Henry Jenkins who, in his book *Textual Poachers* (1992), expands upon the pre-existing concept developed by De Certeau of "poaching" to describe this consumption of text. Though the original meaning of this term referred to popular reading, Jenkins (1992) expands upon the term to incorporate the relationship between fans and the media text of obsession:

> [Fans'] activities pose important questions about the ability of media producers to constrain the creation and circulation of meanings. Fans construct their cultural and social identity through borrowing and inflecting mass culture

> images, articulating concerns which often go unvoiced within the dominant media. (23)

In short, it is the personalizing of a given text that spurs a subsequent following of that text, based on a given interpretation; the meaning becomes produced and integrated into the life of its "fans." As Jenkins (1992) explains, "Fandom here becomes a participatory culture which transforms the experience of media consumption into the production of new texts, indeed of a new culture and a new community" (46). This new community results in fan-produced texts which reiterate and reinforce said interpretation; the focus in fan studies then comes to be on fans as a participatory culture. It is when media consumers take an active role in the consumption of media by manufacturing their own media based on the same content that fan cultures are born.

As previously mentioned, academics have been guilty of applying subcultural concepts to fan studies. Further clarification has been made by Hills (2002), who writes: "Previous fan ethnography has largely erred on the side of accepting fan discourse as interpretive 'knowledge'. My aim here is to reconsider fan discourse as a justification for fan passions and attachments" (66). This quote highlights the difference between subcultural approaches (such as this one) and fan culture approaches, whereby subcultural approaches focus on "knowledge" and group dynamics, while fan approaches investigate "fan passions and attachments."

Further, there has been a preoccupation within fan studies on the placement of the academic within the fan community; there is an underlying assumption that academics studying fan cultures are often fans themselves and must therefore negotiate their position as an "aca-fen" (Jenkins, 2006). Once again, Hills clarifies:

> By focusing so intently on the academic-fan, academic accounts show a rather dismaying short-sightedness. What they consistently neglect is the possibility that fan and academic identities can also be hybridized or brought together not simply in the academy but also outside of it, in the figure of the fan scholar. (15)

By the same token, subcultural studies does not seem to encounter this same dilemma as often. There have been cases where the researcher has openly acknowledged himself as a member of the subculture that he studies (Hodkinson, 2002), but this was thought to be beneficial to data gathering. In other cases, the researcher is not necessarily a member of a subculture, and this stance is perfectly acceptable within subcultural studies (Bennett, 2004; Gelder, 2005; Hebdige, 1979; Thornton, 1996). For example, I am not a Penny Arcade fan, nor am I a gamer; my position and methodology will be addressed in detail below.

The overlap of subculture studies and fan cultures becomes muddied when applied to gamers. There are further similarities between fan cultures and gamers specifically in terms of their social positioning. Like the gaming subculture, many fan cultures must contend with ongoing negative social stereotypes, such as those that were listed in the quote from the *New Hackers Dictionary* given above. Jenkins' (1992) writes about these social stereotypes:

> The fan still constitutes a scandalous category in contemporary culture, one alternately the target of ridicule and anxiety, of dread and desire. Whether viewed as a religious fanatic, a psychopathic killer, a neurotic fantasist, or a lust-crazed groupie, the fan remains a "fanatic" or false worshiper, whose interests are fundamentally alien to the realm of "normal" cultural experience and whose mentality is dangerously our of touch with reality. ( 15)

Gamers and fans may be publicly scrutinized and more or less misunderstood, and as such may express counter-culture or anti-mainstream sentiments. In a recent book entitled *Videogames*, James Newman (2004) explores gamers as fans and here tries to account for their low position on the social hierarchy:

> Videogames are seen by their detractors as not merely responsible for solitary experiences, but for isolating ones, too. As a result, they not only appeal to loners, but actually create them, hence giving rise to the popular conception of videogame fans as reclusive outsiders, distant and disengaged from society, both unwilling and incapable of interacting with others. (146)

Just as Jenkins describes his fans as "Trekkies," Newman notes that gamers may be perceived to fall into the same mainstream categorization "of the 'computer geek' or 'nerd' as figure of fun" (148). Based on these similar cultural politics, Newman makes the argument for the gamer-fan. He goes on to identify several ways in which gamers reproduce text such as videogame art, music, and the act of costume play, whereby fans dress up as their favorite videogame characters. Of particular importance is the way Newman credits the internet with enabling the production and distribution of these texts and expressions of fandom: "It is clear also that the internet, and particularly the web, have considerably extended the communicative and discursive potentials of fans and the various interconnected websites, discussion groups, and other forums have become the nexus for fan activity" (156). Penny Arcade is an example of one such "nexus".

There is ample evidence that Penny Arcade fans are indeed a participatory culture, but their expression of fandom is toward Penny Arcade itself, and not the surrounding videogame culture: for example, at the 2006 PAX, attendees came with art and real-life depictions of Penny Arcade characters. At best, the Penny Arcade subculture

may be described as gamers who are fans of Penny Arcade; in most cases, however, the individuals in this study described themselves as gamers first and Penny Arcade fans second. It is the full-on identification as a "gamer" and not a fan that somewhat declassifies them as fans according to the aforementioned definitions. Jenkins (1992) considers his group of fans to be part of a "weekend-only world" (282) that they participate in, not an identity that transcends into the realm of everyday life, as is often the case with gamers.

While important similarities exist and fan studies has much to offer subcultural approaches, the unique positioning of the Penny Arcade subculture warrants that gamers are more appropriately perceived as a subculture, and not solely in "fan culture" terms. Accordingly, a predominantly subcultural approach was chosen for this study.

**A Brief Mention of Online Communities**

The Penny Arcade subculture is in the unique position of being both an online and face-to-face community. The ability of a website to create a community of fans and return visitors is not unusual. The origins of this type of web behaviour can be traced back to the very first blogs and, similarly, forum-type settings where like-minded individuals are brought together through a text-based dialogue centered on a common theme or interest. The concept of "online communities" is widely accepted and has been applied to many forms of online engagement, including religious groups, fan clubs, and hobby sites (Bakardjieva, 2003). Gaming and gaming cultures undoubtedly constitute some of the largest and most prominent online communities. Games like World of Warcraft, Second Life and Oblivion have millions of players that congregate in an online

virtual environment. While Penny Arcade could be considered an online community, the nature of the site extends beyond typical definitions of online communities and instead delves into the intricate characteristics of subculture itself. It is still important, however, to consider social dynamics occurring within online environments, and to acknowledge that online interactions in gameplay and virtual environments is yet another important manifestation of gamer culture, though it is not the focus here.

**Methodology**

In researching the cultural politics of the Penny Arcade subculture, I employed a multi-method ethnographic approach, modelled after that which was successfully applied by Hodkinson (2002). This included participant observation, in-depth interviews, and a website/media analysis. Though I am not a gamer, after having been introduced to the site I became an avid reader. I attended the 2006 Penny Arcade Expo (PAX) in Bellevue, Washington and observed the three-day gaming event. While there I also managed to recruit interview participants. I interviewed seven people directly; their personal comments confirmed much of my analysis of the website and comic. My interview sample consisted of 5 gamers, one PR rep from a popular gaming website, and one game developer. As well, I visited the Penny Arcade website and read the news-post and comic posted three times a week.

Attending PAX gave me the opportunity to verify the subcultural dynamic from a participant's perspective. It enabled me to witness firsthand the manifestation of the shared taste and identity of the group, as well as to partake in the sense of community and loyalty that was exhibited. The event took place in the Meydenbauer Center a four storied

open-concept convention centre with high glass windows and ceilings. Escalators ran up and down the peripheral of the hall so that one could overlook PAX in all its glory while in transit, and this in itself was a pretty impressive site. The first floor hosted a massive exhibition hall where hundreds of vendors had merchandise booths and games available for demo. Beside this was the main theatre, prepped and ready to seat thousands of gamers for the Penny Arcade Q&A and comic strip drawing sessions and the gamer rock concerts. The fourth floor was dedicated solely to game play, including rooms for console, PC and table top free-play as well as some of the videogame tournaments. Games were available for free rental or gamers could also play games they brought with them.

The schedule for the three day event was replete with activities. One could choose from a selection of panels, movies, tournaments, and various contests at any given time to attend and partake in. I tried to observe at least one of each of these. I sat in on a panel entitled "I'm Getting Old: When life cuts into gaming" as well as a session where gamers could pitch their game ideas to a panel of industry reps. At one point, I found myself being a judge at a Quagmire (a character from the TV show *Family Guy*) impersonating contest where I was to select the best impersonation out of five very keen contestants. I was sure to attend all of the Penny Arcade presentations, such as the Q & A sessions and the comic drawing session. These were the most popular of all the events and this meant waiting in line for up to an hour just to ensure a place inside the main theatre. However, even waiting in line was an experience – in one particular line, a game was made out of tossing a giant blue ball into the air with the goal of reaching the fourth floor balcony. This had the crowd captivated and enjoying themselves.

In general, the atmosphere was fun and relaxed and I found most of the attendees to be extremely friendly, which made it easy to recruit interview participants. I seldom approached potential candidates; in most cases, I let them initiate interaction, be it while standing in line, lounging about on one of the many bean bag chairs, or walking en-route to the PAX convention centre. All but one of the resulting interviews were conducted over the phone and involved a series of open-ended questions and related discussion. The interviews were loosely structured; in general, I asked participants to discuss their experience with Penny Arcade, starting from how they first learned about them, their favourite comic and their thoughts on Penny Arcade's logic and behaviour. In the cases of the industry representative and the game developer, I was more interested in getting an idea of Penny Arcade's position within the wider context of the gaming industry in terms of their perceived influence over, and relationship with, the industry. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed.

My approach to interviewing mimics that described by Keith Negus (1999) in his book *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures*:

> I have used interviewing in an attempt to understand how individuals within the music industry perceive and imagine the world in which they are working. I have not taken this as a reality that is simply constructed (a "reality" brought into being during an interview), any more than I have adopted a naive realist approach and presumed that what is said during an interview can be understood as a "reflection" of reality. (11)

Accordingly, the views shared by participants cannot be taken to be representative of all Penny Arcade fans or gamers, but rather, stand alone as the voice of the respective

individual and his unique perspective. The interviews are assumed to represent a reality, not "the" reality.

My analysis of the website itself consisted of at least three visits a week which involved reading the newspost and corresponding comic from June 2006 – August 2007, as well as reviewing the website archives as necessary. My investigation was largely navigated by the topics and issues raised by the Penny Arcade fans I spoke with, as well as by some of the more publicized occurrences which were cross-referenced using external media sources. The Penny Arcade site itself provides links to gaming articles and pertinent industry news, which was also a useful way of attaining data. Though my focus was on the newspost and web-comic, I occasionally would visit the forums (approximately once every two weeks) to see what topics were being discussed. All three of these methods provided a well-rounded approach to my investigation into the Penny Arcade subculture.

On a final note, this work aspires to help repair the split in cultural studies between the theoretical and the empirical (see Hills in Jenkins, 2006), through seeking a cohesive application of both. By applying the subcultural framework identified by Hodkinson (2002) and the pre-existing work on the cultural economy, the precise function of authenticity and subcultural capital will be examined. This study is intended not just to be an application of these terms, but will identify how these concepts have been strategically applied by Penny Arcade, through what I call the "manipulation of subcultural capital," for social and economic gain. Previous subcultural work from the Frankfurt, Chicago, and Birmingham schools and the later post-subcultures work and beyond focused strictly on counter-culture, resistance, and identity. In this study, I

expand the focus of subcultural studies by drawing attention to the strategic use of subcultural capital and demonstrating how the manipulation of subcultural capital can enable a subculture, such as Penny Arcade, to retain the loyalty of its members while simultaneously seeking profit and publicity through mainstream endeavours.

# CHAPTER 3: SUBCULTURAL FOUNDATIONS AND THE CREATION OF SUBCULTURAL CAPITAL

Before discussing the Penny Arcade subculture, it is necessary to demonstrate how and why Penny Arcade can be considered a subculture. This chapter will first establish the defining features of Penny Arcade as they align with Hodkinson's four criteria of "cultural substance": identity, consistent distinctiveness, commitment and autonomy. Second, I will identify the elements of the Penny Arcade subculture that construct Penny Arcade's unifying subcultural code or subcultural capital, those being the adoption and use of gamer insider vocabulary, an anti-mainstream sardonic persona, and the use of Penny Arcade products/merchandise. Third, this chapter will look at how Penny Arcade constructs their rebel image in opposition to the mainstream through the examination of three instances of public controversy, all of which help to strengthen feelings of membership solidarity. Finally, the last section will consider how Penny Arcade makes acceptable onsite advertising by means of going "undercover"; the delicate balancing act of subsuming to advertising while simultaneously opposing it so as to remain authentic and 'grassroots' in the eyes of their fans. These elements build and enhance Penny Arcade's internal symbolic capital in the restricted field of production, giving them the leverage and support needed to eventually cross-over into the large-scale field of production as discussed in Chapter 4.

**Penny Arcade meets Hodkinson**

Like Penny Arcade, Goth subculture, as studied by Paul Hodkinson, is geographically separated and thus shares "both a translocal sense of identity and a relatively consistent and distinctive set of tastes and values" (28). The Penny Arcade subculture can be considered "translocal" in large part because of its online origins, which breed the sense of subcultural identity that is elsewhere reinforced at PAX and other gaming events, as well as by Penny Arcade's established subcultural code which separates Penny Arcade fans from non-Penny Arcade fans. Hodkinson's definition does not aim to replace previous methods of conceiving subcultures, but rather his notion of (sub)cultural substance seeks to expand on them:

> Essentially, the task is to combine useful general aspects of the Birmingham and Chicago School approaches, with a more flexible approach to contemporary identities and recognition of the roles of media and commerce in the construction of popular cultural groupings. The scope of the term is broadened through severing its automatic link with resistance, problem-solving, class conflict or spontaneity. (29)

Accordingly, cultural substance is comprised of identity, commitment, consistent distinctiveness, and autonomy. Though Hodkinson provides a chapter by chapter in-depth look at the four criteria in his book, such a detailed analysis of these criteria in application to Penny Arcade is not the aim of this study. What follows here is a more general overview of the four criteria to position Penny Arcade within a subcultural framework, an understanding that will carryover into the later cultural-political investigation of the subculture's dynamics.

*Identity*

To review, Hodkinson's (2002) first criterion, identity, refers to "the extent to which participants hold a perception that they are involved in a distinct cultural grouping and share feelings of identity with one another" (30-31). This is reflected in a sense of like-mindedness among individuals and can also be drawn from "feelings of distinction from those regarded as outsiders" (31). Contained within the concept of "identity," Hodkinson acknowledges the function of subcultural capital in purveying a sense of distinction from those who are not part of the group, and as a means of strengthening the internal identification within the group. Though subcultural capital undoubtedly plays into member identity, its ability to harness feelings of member loyalty and unity, thereby strengthening the influence of the subculture on its members, it will be addressed separately in this chapter.

From an industry perspective, the label of "gamer" can take on many different meanings. Andy[1] (A), a public relations specialist for a popular gaming website told me how his company breaks down the gaming market. From his standpoint, Andy identified three types of gamers: casual, players, and core. Casual gamers could be likened to people who like to play Solitaire on their computers; in other words, games are viewed as fun but not worthy of financial investment. Players are people who play the occasional console or PC game and make relatively inconsistent gaming purchases. It is core gamers that Andy thinks comprise the Penny Arcade subculture and are the target market of his company. He defines core gamers as:

A: The [people] who are super hardcore, buying tons of games, spending a lot of time and money on it, they talk about it with their friends, they're likely to use a website. They're the ones who will visit our site and set up a profile and make that their social network [with] other gamers and it's like one of their main hobbies, and a lot of them are interested in getting into the industry if they're not in it already.

The group of gamers that Andy refers to is more inclined to engage in the external gaming network, which is also a reflection of where they see themselves fitting in and belonging. It is no surprise then that people who are passionate about gaming would seek likeminded individuals who share this passion, and that the Penny Arcade subculture would present an opportunity for this experience. Taking into consideration the above breakdown of the gaming market, it is likely only core gamers that would *identify* themselves as gamers.

When Andy's company contracted out a study about this market, interestingly enough, the study included a section on how gamers identified themselves. Andy shared with me the results and his interpretation of this:

A: The top four most common terms were adventurous, . . . funny, competitive, and intelligent. So [core gamers] mostly think of themselves not so much in terms of the technology . . . but as being smart and playful people who like to engage in these kind of mental puzzles and have fun with it. You can see why they really are attracted to other people who also like games and tend to like all kinds of games too. The least common terms, at least self-identified, would be a loner . . . reserved, is another one. They see themselves as being outgoing, not reserved, so definitely

---

[1] The names of all participants have been changed and will be referenced by the first initial of their given pseudonyms: A,B,C,D,E,F respectively. The author will be represented as BHM.

> not like sitting in a basement alone. A "geek" was another one that they said. So there's a lot of joking around about the pride in being a geek and everything, but when you actually ask people who are gamers how they describe themselves they don't really see themselves as geeks. . . . The one that I thought was the most interesting was tech-savvy. That was one of the least common ways that they'd describe themselves.

According to this survey, participants were least likely to identify with the social stereotypes of gamers and tended to see themselves in a more positive light. Despite this, the label of "gamer" was still acceptable, but the connotation of the term needed to be adjusted before the subject identified with it.

A similar trend occurred in my own interviews. Most participants included references to themselves within their definitions of a gamer, and the participants identified with the label of "gamer" when asked if they considered themselves to be one. In general, participants' definitions of a gamer didn't match with the common stereotypes they assigned to gamers, such as a (typically) teenaged male who is overweight, eats junk food, is non-athletic, has poor hygiene, and is, overall, a socially awkward geek.

In summary, the three main attributes that were mentioned were someone who was creative, had an appreciation for game-play, and exhibited a passion through gaming in ways that extended into other aspects of the subject's life. Both Brian (B) and Cody (C) identified with the label by describing themselves:

> B: The people that I picture first when I'm thinking about gaming are more the sort of fantastic creative people who appreciate the kind of game worlds that go on. Or at least, I'm basically going to describe myself because what else am I going to describe. . . .

> C: [Gamers] obviously have to play games. Maybe if they're setting aside a portion of their income and . . . that's their relaxation of choice, at least that's my relaxation of choice . . . I'm moving on in my life, but at least earlier gaming was a big enough part of my life that it would be on my walls, like I have a poster for a game on the wall or my desktop would be basically a game advertisement. I did that at work for a while. I was into Guild Wars, so my background at work was Guild Wars. So it's kind of like incorporating it in more aspects of your life than necessary. The other thing is that I actually spend my free time with my friends talking about games, [so] I think that would be a third characteristic.

Davin (D) had a similar take. He considered himself to be a gamer, and defined a gamer as:

> D: Somebody who not only sits down and plays videogames, because most people that I know of my age group have a PS2 [PlayStation 2] or they play a game now and then, but to be a gamer is to be somebody who thinks about gaming and actually enjoys it. Like really, just kinda gets into it. Like I'm not the best at a lot of games . . . but that doesn't bother me because I love playing. That to me is somebody who is a gamer: they really like games.

The above definitions of a gamer each had a different emphasis. In the first case, a gamer is someone who has a unique appreciation for the game-play experience. In Cody's explanation, he focuses more on the extent that gaming plays into other areas of life, such as having a Guild Wars background on his computer at work and a corresponding social life. Davin emphasized the love of playing, and his reference to thinking about games suggests that gaming also overlaps with other areas of his life. In general, to be a gamer one must authenticate oneself as a passionate individual who can truly appreciate the value of gaming. This leads us into the next of Hodkinson's four criteria.

*Consistent Distinctiveness*

As Hodkinson notes, "distinctiveness and identity are inextricably linked with one another" (65); accordingly, consistent distinctiveness can be conceived as "the existence of a set of shared tastes and values which is distinctive from those of other groups and reasonably consistent" (30). The previous discussion on the "identity" criterion focused on the broader gaming subculture and was reflected in terms of whether the participant identified with the label of gamer. When discussing consistent distinctiveness, I intend to focus more explicitly on the tastes and values that are exclusive to the Penny Arcade gamer subculture, for it is here that the loyalty and identity that shapes this particular subculture is most conveyed.

Taste exists among gamers as it does among music collectors or other such restricted fields of production. In the Penny Arcade case, people who played on a casual basis or played games that fell within mainstream genres such as the sports genre were not to be taken seriously as gamers. Taste is reflected in the type of game played and the ability to appreciate it and must be founded on a similar value system.

The underlying values of Penny Arcade subculture is that Penny Arcade manifests an independent grassroots sensibility. It is therefore able both to give gamers a voice and to represent gamers both within and outside of the gaming community.

> B: [Penny Arcade fans are] the sort of niche, almost borderline obsessive gaming hobbyists for lack of a better way to put it, I think they're the hardcore audience who will do things like read a comic everyday and pick out all the little references and get that into it and who don't associate themselves with mainstream gaming industry and take pride in the fact that they're independent even though I think that's sort of more posturing than reality, there are a lot of significant games produced by huge companies and

> so . . . I'm reluctant to wear that badge of hardcore gamer, independent gamer but there's definitely a lot of people who read their comics, and even you if you don't associate as such, the mentality's kind of the same.

Andy refers to this same "independence" as a value that is also reflected in taste:

> A: I think a lot of [Penny Arcade fans] tend to skew a little bit more towards old school games and favouring the little guy, favouring Nintendo over Xbox or Sony. They tend to be a little more idealistic or grassroots or independent, sort of "fight the power," "I'm not going to buy into that crap," "I'm not going feed the machine," "I'm not going to serve man." "I wanna play stuff that is genuine and has heart and is really about game play and not about graphics." It's not about horsepower; it's about quality of play.

The most interesting overlap between identity and the values parlayed in the group's consistent distinctiveness is reflected in the fact that Penny Arcade fans identify with the opinions and social positioning of Penny Arcade and go so far as to consider Penny Arcade's voice as their own, as the "gamer's gamer":

> C: They do give a voice and I probably continue to go there because I like the voice that they give, especially with the Child's Play and that kind of thing where they're doing a lot of good things for people in need, for me that's important and part of the reason why I continue to support them.

> D: Well I think that [Penny Arcade] become the voice of a lot of people, a very large group of people and they've done it in a very humble manner, like they haven't tried to commercialize themselves. They make a joke out of selling out but they really haven't. They listen and they know what we like because they are us.

While most Penny Arcade fans identify themselves as gamers, by associating themselves with Penny Arcade, these individuals assume a set of beliefs and values that speak to the calibre of gamer they are as reflected in his or her taste in games, as well as in the independent and "grassroots" social positioning within the larger gaming subculture. It is

through examining consistent distinctiveness that a unique Penny Arcade subculture is revealed.

*Commitment*

Penny Arcade fans demonstrate commitment in two ways: first, at the level they are engaged in the act of playing video games (enacting their "gamer" status); and secondly, at the level they are engaged in the Penny Arcade community (site visitation, podcasts, forums, PAX). According to Hodkinson, commitment is apparent through a "concentrated and continuous practical involvement among participants" (31); accordingly, it is the second instance of commitment that I intend to explore here because it is at this level that the relationship to Penny Arcade subculture is created and sustained.

Most interviewees visited the site at least three times a week, on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday when a new comic and newspost would go up. But some, like Davin for example, visited the site daily:

BHM: So tell me first, how often do you visit the PA site?

D: Just about once a day, but more frequently when it's Monday, Wednesday, Friday.

In Cody's case, even when he didn't have the opportunity to visit the site, he still intended on catching up on the content that he had missed in that time:

BHM: How often do you visit the PA website?

C: Gosh, well in the last seven months, my life's been kind of changing so not very often actually. But before then, it was every day that the comic came out, so Monday, Wednesday, Friday . . . It's been a busy time, I intend on catching up and getting back to it.

In addition to visiting the site, most of the subjects had participated in the forum at one time or another, but only a few tuned in to the podcast. Davin didn't listen to it out of principle:

> BHM: You listen to the podcast I'm guessing?
>
> D: No, I don't, I don't have an iPod . . . I don't have iTunes; I fight that regime.

Davin's position on iTunes is consistent with the general anti-mainstream attitude promoted by Penny Arcade, who ironically bought into the iTunes "regime" themselves by making their podcast available on it. It is also consistent with the way Penny Arcade fans were perceived from the industry's perspective, as having a "fight the machine" independent and grassroots sensibility. This tension between mainstream commercial pursuits and the independent face of Penny Arcade will be explored in-depth later in this chapter.

Aside from visiting the site, the most exemplary act of commitment is attending the yearly Penny Arcade Expo (PAX). As six out of the seven interview participants were recruited at the Expo, their attendance at the event speaks to this; as Davin put it, "I stepped inside and the first thing I thought was 'so this is Mecca.'" The subjects spoke consistently about the sense of community around the event and the fact that in going, they would find likeminded individuals to identify with:

> B: I was repeatedly impressed by the fact that there were just that many people [at PAX] who geeked out about the same things I do. When I'm at home or obviously in a new city . . . there's not that high of percentage of people who are serious about games . . . so it was strange to just drop into the middle of that and be able to talk about obscure gaming references and the latest news that nobody else really

> reviews except for these folks, so I don't think there was any way that I could have not liked it, but I was impressed.

Fredrick (F) saw it as a way of supporting the community:

> BHM: So what does it mean for you to go PAX? You said you'd gone a couple of years before?
>
> F: Yeah. I guess I try to support the community . . . [it's] kind of fun [to get to] play games with some people.

Commitment is a major aspect of the Penny Arcade subculture, whereby the site acts as a central hub of connection for fans and the annual PAX offers fans an opportunity to connect physically with one another and further solidify their belonging and sense of identity.

*Autonomy*

The final criterion to examine is that of autonomy, that is "a good proportion of the productive or organizational activities which underpin it are liable to be undertaken by and for enthusiasts" (Hodkinson, 2002, 32). This includes "particularly high levels of grass-roots insider participation in cultural production" (32). When applied as an indicator or measurement of subcultural status, "the grouping concerned, while inevitably connected to the society and politico-economic system of which it is a part, retains a *relatively* high level of autonomy" (32).

The best indication of this is the manufacturing and selling of a distinct line of Penny Arcade merchandise, but this will be discussed in more detail in the context of their

subcultural code below. For now, ethnographic observations and statistical data on PAX 2006, Child's Play, and onsite participation will serve as indicators of autonomy.

As an event that caters specifically to Penny Arcade insiders and the gamer subculture as a whole, PAX is a great example of insider participation. First and foremost, the entire event was run on volunteer participation. This included over 200 volunteers in 2006, working up to ten-hour days throughout the four-day expo (Khoo, 2007). What's more, fans who attended the event had constructed life-sized figures of the comic's central characters, and some had designed miniature versions for retail. With over 30,000 attendees expected by PAX organizers at the 2007 PAX (Khoo, 2007), such endeavours are more or less guaranteed to receive maximum exposure.

Further, insider participation can be seen in participant involvement of the Penny Arcade charity, Child's Play. Between 75,000 and 100,000 fans donated money to the charity in 2006 (Khoo, 2007), and all of the subjects interviewed for this study had already made a donation or intended to in the coming year.

Obviously the main organization and productive activities are undertaken by the Penny Arcade guys themselves, but in order for these activities to be successful, the support of the surrounding subculture is required. So while Penny Arcade fans are not necessarily profiting by their participation, they are donating their time and money towards the success and proliferation of the subculture itself through their attendance at PAX, their donations to the charity, and their ongoing involvement with the website itself (attendance ranges anywhere from 400,000 to 425,000 readers on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays) (Khoo, 2007).

**The Creation of Subcultural Capital**

Subcultural capital is a defining tool of cohesion and loyalty of the Penny Arcade subculture. The construction and deployment of subcultural capital by members serves as a unique code of identification by which members can relate to one another as individuals and to the subculture as a whole. To return to Thornton's original application of the concept of subcultural capital, "being 'hip' or 'in the know' is testimony to the very selective nature of contemporary communications; 'subcultural capital' is defined against the supposedly obscene accessibility of mass culture" (Thornton, 1996, 121). This form of subcultural capital sets the standards of authenticity for the members of their fan base; as such, subcultural capital is created and maintained through three main components which are exclusive to Penny Arcade's identity: the adoption and use of gamer insider vocabulary; a consistent persona of sarcasm and anti-mainstream sentiments; and the manufacturing and distribution of Penny Arcade products/merchandise. Examples of these three forms of subcultural capital will be discussed in detail below to demonstrate the integral role that subcultural capital plays in perpetuating and strengthening fan loyalty and identity.

*Insider Vocabulary*

Penny Arcade is considered to be an online authority on recently released videogames and videogame technology, having been deemed "tastemakers for consumers and moguls in the video game industry" (Turner, 2004), and "an unbiased source, an unfiltered voice of the gamers" (Peterson, 2004). As such, gamers visit Penny Arcade to relate and feel part of something exclusive. In order to follow Penny Arcade and "get" the

jokes and references to gaming culture, one must necessarily be a fully integrated member of the gaming culture. This is an obvious example of subcultural capital at work. Because Tycho and Gabe use gamer vocabulary (such as abbreviations, game lingo, and industry players, see Figure 3.1), they authenticate themselves as official gamers within the subculture by defining and demonstrating their knowledge of the culture.


**Figure 3.1 "That Terrible Grip" (2007/06/20). This comic illustrates the referencing of specific videogames and the use of specific game-related language, requiring a certain level of knowledge on the part of the reader.**

Not only must one be a gamer to get the website, but it is an asset that one be a faithful reader of Penny Arcade to fully understand all of the Penny Arcade-specific references. Often, Tycho and Gabe will revisit on-going jokes or themes (like the Pac-man shirt always worn by Gabe) or feature certain comic characters who consistently make return appearances. These methods necessitate a background knowledge and familiarity among readers for the full meaning of the comic to be appreciated. The exclusive nature of this insider language was acknowledged by the interviewees as well:

> B: I think the biggest self-referencing that they do is in the characters that they've created that don't pop up

> consistently, [and] are . . . big players and [these characters] all have personalities and followings just because the comic is so big. They all have their fans, so once they put these big players in the comic it usually sparks symbolism and that's something only an insider would really get . . . Yeah, there's definitely jokes they make that are even beyond a gamer that doesn't read the comic, that are strictly for insiders who associate strongly with Penny Arcade.

In the following two excerpts, both participants acknowledged the presence of insider references and agreed that having background knowledge of the comic is an asset but does not prevent an outsider from being able to enjoy the comic on a more superficial level:

> D: Well, there are a lot of references, like you'll see things in the comic that you will know about, but it's not exclusive in that you can't appreciate it without those [references]. You can look at a Twisp and Catsby comic (see Figure 3.2) and think it's weird and funny at the same time and not really know why Twisp and Catsby even came about.[2]

> C: They are exclusive culturally, a little bit, but they're not turning anyone away. It's not like, "oh too bad, you missed out on the joke we're never going to let you in on the joke," it's "we would love for you to get this. If you don't, here's where you can start to understand it." And so I don't think that they're ever shunning anyone away in an exclusive manner.

Though Cody's comment suggests that Penny Arcade is non-gamer friendly, however, from the perspective of someone who doesn't consider himself to be a "core" gamer, Andy admits that a lot of the gamer references are beyond his comprehension:

> A: Yeah a lot of it goes over my head. I get like half the blogs when they start getting into games specifics and they're

---

[2] Twisp and Catsby are just one of the many sub-series done by Penny Arcade. Others include the Cardboard Tube Samurai, Mr. Period, and Anarchy.

> talking about [games] that [have] come out, or web developers are working on. I frequently don't really know what they're talking about [be]cause I haven't played the games . . . You'd have to be more of a gamer to get the website and especially the comic. The event though I feel is cool because it could actually have a much broader appeal.

The gaming lingo and Penny Arcade references are a definitive feature of the group's subcultural code, but as many of the gamers acknowledged, it is not a barrier to appreciating the comic. This indicates that there are different levels of comprehension relative to a reader's relationship with the website. Insider references and a restricted vocabulary function to separate avid and dedicated fans from perhaps more casual and uninformed site visitors, thereby reinforcing a sense of authenticity and belonging among members of the subculture.


**Figure 3.2 "Twisp and Catsby in: The Crocotillian" (2004/04/07).**

*Sardonic Anti-Mainstream Persona*

It's not just the use of gaming lingo that creates this subcultural capital, but Tycho and Gabe's tendency to antagonize mainstream values and media and to play off mainstream stereotypes make other gamers feel they are part of something exclusive, something they can identify with. Equally important is the sardonic manner through which Tycho and Gabe do it. There is no doubt that the voices behind Penny Arcade possess a distinct writing style and unique sense of humour that their followers have come to love and expect from them. This, combined with a certain charisma, enables them to be the voice of their fans. The exclusivity maintained by this form of subcultural capital is achieved as follows: through the rebelling against mainstream stereotypes, and through the humorous manner by which this is done. The former implies that one needs to be a gamer to appreciate this attack on mainstream stereotypes about gamers to find the content relevant in the first place; the latter implies that one needs to possess a similar sense of humour in order to find the jokes funny.

Penny Arcade targets typical social stereotypes held against gamers, such as speculation that videogames make gamers violent and that gamers are anti-social nerds. Figure 3.3 is an earlier Penny Arcade comic that mocks the social misconception about videogames and violence.


**Figure 3.3 "The Longest Line" (1999/12/13). Penny Arcade parodying social stereotypes that videogames lead to violence.**

Other stereotypes that Penny Arcade satirizes are that male gamers are awkward around members of the opposite sex (see Figure 3.4), or that gamers are so engulfed in a virtual world that they are out of touch with reality:

> D: A typical person who likes Penny Arcade is usually somebody who . . . can step outside of themselves for a moment because there [are] a lot of times in the comic where [Penny Arcade will] laugh at themselves. Stuff like, "Wait the sky, that's the things with legs isn't it?" And you sit there and you think about it for a minute and you're like "Yah, I spend a lot of time indoors." So there's people that appreciate a different sort of humour . . . that's the kind of people they are, they need a little bit of substance behind their wit.

The previous comment makes reference to both the content and the style of humour that is unique to Penny Arcade. The restrictive nature of this sense of humour is most easily conceptualized through similar comments. Some of the most telling responses that reflected the appeal of Penny Arcade's sarcastic manner came out of questions around the

nature of the site and what draws people to Penny Arcade. Participants struggled to articulate Penny Arcade's unique charisma:

> BHM: So if you were telling a fellow gamer about PA who'd never heard of them, what would you tell them?
>
> B: I would tell them that it's a couple of guys with a really sarcastic sense of humour that like to lampoon videogame culture and if that hooks them, then they would probably like the [comic] strip.
>
> BHM: Okay, so who are PA fans then?
>
> D: Gamers . . . and I think that you have to be a certain type of person that really kinda appreciates dry wit. Like sometimes they say things that are really really funny but you have to kind of appreciate their sense of humour.

The above three quotes definitively describe Penny Arcade's style of humour as being dry, sarcastic, and witty, and that only a "certain kind of person" who shares this style of humour *and* is also a gamer would be able to enjoy the Penny Arcade site. This relates back to the sharing of tastes and values so pertinent to a group's consistent distinctiveness. Andy references this by emphasizing the importance of "insider status" and the context it provides that is so crucial to understanding Penny Arcade's sense of humour:

> A: [Penny Arcade is] cool, you know, they're definitely fun, but if you don't have a little bit of a cushion and background to understand what they're saying it could be misinterpreted or inflammatory in a way that [PA] probably wouldn't even intend themselves.

By taking pre-existing mainstream views and using them as a tool for identification and cohesion through humour and sarcasm, Penny Arcade is essentially strengthening the

subculture's "us versus them" resolve; the result is a heightened sense of subcultural capital.


**Figure 3.4 "Also known as Blackmail." (2003/06/30). Penny Arcade mocks the gamer stereotype that males who play videogames are inexperienced with the opposite sex.**

*Penny Arcade Merchandising*

As mentioned, post-subculture theories acknowledge the validity of niche marketing within subcultures (Thornton, 1996); Penny Arcade is no exception as evidenced by the range of merchandise available at the Penny Arcade online store. Penny Arcade merchandise as a function of subcultural capital contains some undeniable parallels to the role of onsite advertising and marketing in the construction of Penny Arcade identity. Onsite advertising, however, will be addressed separately in a following section, despite some obvious areas of overlap. This section will demonstrate how Penny Arcade's unique branding and identity inherent in their line of merchandise is a third form of subcultural capital that works to cement member loyalty and identity.

The sale of Penny Arcade merchandise was initially contracted out to another website and was only recently transferred to the Penny Arcade site itself. The Penny Arcade store sells posters featuring the comics' most popular characters, t-shirts with Penny Arcade and gamer references, DVDs of PAX and PAX music, and even a Penny Arcade tabletop card game. In many ways the status of belonging to this subculture is reflected in the purchasing and owning of these items. For example, limited hardcover editions for each of the three Penny Arcade comic anthologies were deemed must-have collector's items and their ownership served as a testimony of one's devotion and loyalty to the subculture. Penny Arcade fans are avidly anticipating the Penny Arcade videogame *On the Rain-Slick Precipice of Darkness* currently in production by Hothead Games, sure to make it into the hands of the most authentic Penny Arcade fans.

The merchandise promotes subcultural capital in other ways as well. By carrying over Penny Arcade culture into the outside world, group identity is reinforced through the recognition of Penny Arcade branding. Penny Arcade apparel is a perfect case-in-point (as shown in Figure 3.5). The t-shirts display various inside jokes made either in the newspost or comic, or the shirts play off of references to videogame vocabulary or symbols. In order to "get" the shirt, one must possess a high degree of subcultural capital, thus legitimizing oneself as a Penny Arcade fan. A mutual understanding of these t-shirts facilitates an automatic identification of a fellow member:

> C: [Penny Arcade] has its own symbology . . . I would never go out of my way to go talk to someone just because they were wearing a shirt, but if I happen to end up already standing in line next to them or there was some reason to talk to them already [I would], but I'm not going to chase someone across the quad and make a joke to them or something . . .I mean, people can talk to me about Penny

> Arcade that I haven't known already; if I see someone wearing a shirt from Penny Arcade I know that I can go up to them and have some sort of common understanding with them.

In addition to the t-shirts, the Penny Arcade Universal Fighting System (UFS) card game is also designed for the exclusive use and enjoyment of Penny Arcade fans, thus transposing the Penny Arcade culture into a socially reinforced activity. As one fan comments:

> D: There are some really goofy cards in there that are some really great references to . . . the comic.

The game can be played alone, or with others; in the latter instance, the very act of playing the game requires the participation of, and interaction with, fellow fans. Penny Arcade has made available an impressive selection of merchandise which actively promotes and confirms Penny Arcade member status among fans.


**Figure 3.5 Penny Arcade T-shirts. A few of the t-shirts sold on Penny-Arcade.com, incorporating gamer/Penny Arcade references, including the long-awaited "boobies" tee for ladies.**

Penny Arcade's popularity and their consecration as an authority of gaming culture is garnered through the deployment of subcultural capital. The use of specific

gaming lingo, the ability to expose mainstream misconceptions through a unique sense of humour, and the selling and distribution of Penny Arcade merchandise all unite Penny Arcade fans into a cohesive subculture. The appeal of Penny Arcade's rebellious and sarcastic nature cannot be denied and could be considered instrumental in making some of their contradictory actions seem acceptable. Examples of Penny Arcade's clashes with mainstream society as well as their transparency about onsite advertising will be considered as methods of establishing authenticity and credibility, followed in Chapter 4 by an in-depth look at Child's Play as a special case where both internal and external (mainstream) credibility was achieved.

**The Fight against the Mainstream**

Part of Penny Arcade's rebel image is constructed by their more public disputes with mainstream personas. Their no-nonsense "shoot from the hip" approach to these disputes is consistent with their onsite sardonic personality, but it is the disputes themselves that help to position Penny Arcade as experts within the gaming industry and that are essential to the preservation of their authenticity and credibility within the subculture. In turn, aside from being wildly amusing to Penny Arcade fans, these mainstream controversies have generated an impressive display of fan loyalty and devotion to Tycho and Gabe of Penny Arcade.

Anti-mainstream sentiments and "us verses them" attitudes are typical within subcultures, and Penny Arcade is no exception. In going up against the mainstream, this rebel image creates the perception that the creators of Penny Arcade are authentic, independent players within the gaming industry, serving just-desserts where just-desserts

are due. Three cases in particular that provoked controversy in the field of large-scale production are worth examining: a seductive comic of Strawberry Shortcake; a battle of insults exchanged between Penny Arcade and writer Harlan Ellison; and a very publicized dispute with Jack Thompson, a well-known lawyer and advocate against violent videogames.

*The Corrupting of Strawberry Shortcake*

The announcement made in April 2003 that American McGee was in the process of creating a new game based (loosely) on the classic *Wizard of Oz* movie evoked response from Penny Arcade. McGee, known for his "tendency to nick young female literary characters to create creepy, bloody video games" (John, scazi.com), had previously done so with Alice of *Alice in Wonderland* fame. In a parody of what would soon become of Dorothy at the hands of McGee, Penny Arcade created a smutty comic featuring Strawberry Shortcake (see Figure 3.6), a popular children's television character.

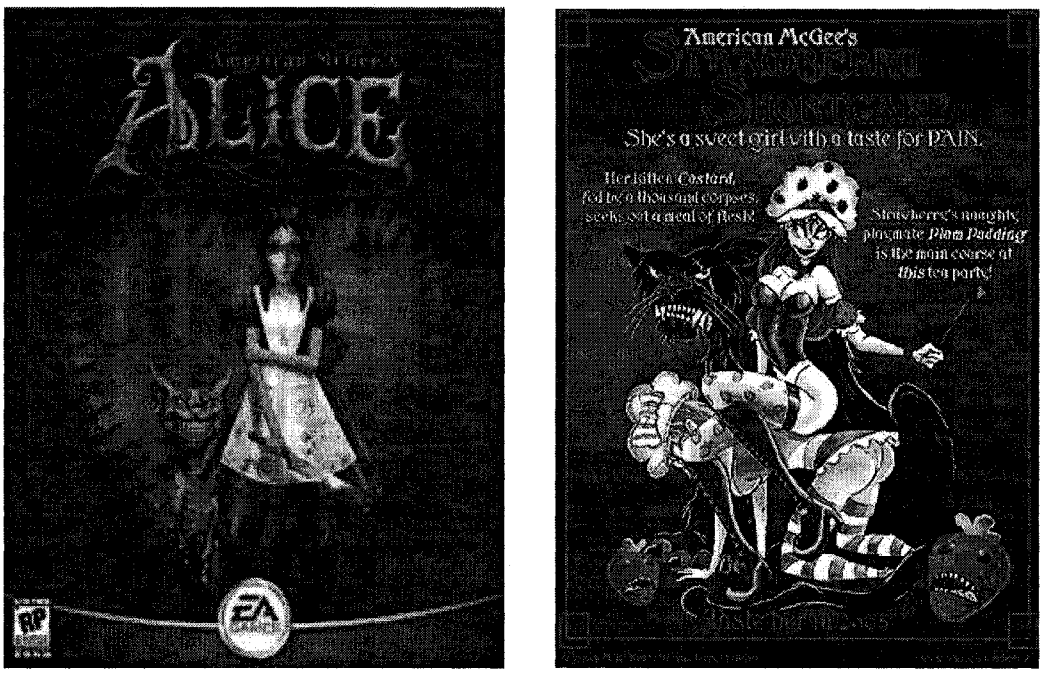


**Figure 3.6 American McGee's Leading Ladies. The American McGee Game (left) compared with the Penny Arcade Strawberry Shortcake parody "Tart as a Double Entendre"**

The newpost's running commentary to the comic included a post by Gabe which read:

> [McGee] is just a pervert and this is all he knows how to do. It's like he has some kind of huge fucking machine. Beloved stories and characters go in one side and junior high quality goth crap comes out the other. Yeah, Yeah McGee, we all know you are very angry. You should save yourself some fucking time and just wear a T-shirt that says "I am dark and brooding". (Gabe, April 14, 2003)

Though the parody was indeed a criticism of McGee's style, Penny Arcade's "naughty" depiction of Strawberry Shortcake triggered outcry from the greeting card company American Greetings, who held the legal rights to the character. One blogger suggested that insult to injury was added by the fact that, without knowledge of American McGee

and his games, American Greetings may have been perceived the name reference as an indirect attack on their own similar sounding name (Skala, 2007). Whatever the case, the greeting card company threatened legal action. A letter sent to Penny Arcade by American Greetings read:

> You must immediately stop using these marks in your website, and you must immediately stop using these marks in connection with inappropriate materials. American Greetings Corporation does NOT support the use of its marks in connection with any type of inappropriate material. ("Letter from American Greeting to Penny Arcade," April 22, 2003)

Fans on the Penny Arcade forum criticized American Greetings, hinting that it was a "harmless parody" and the action was unreasonable. One fan wrote of the banished cartoon: "Another classic, despite its young age. Why? Because American Greetings has decided that it somehow violates their copyrights and trademarks for Strawberry Shortcake, despite the presence of something called PARODY in our society" (SmugMug, April 14th, 2002). In this instance, Penny Arcade was portrayed as the victim of an unreasonable and paranoid major corporation.

Penny Arcade, however, was far from innocent. The Strawberry Shortcake comic was replaced with a message redirecting visitors to an American Greetings representative if they wished to know why Penny Arcade was forced to remove the comic from their site and then later posted a comic depicting representatives from American Greetings as Nazis (see Figure 3.7). The fact that Penny Arcade did not keep quiet about the matter and in many ways continued to aggravate the situation through their comics and newsposts relayed the message to fans that Penny Arcade would not go down without a fight. Tycho comments on the Nazi comic:

> Truth be told, this one is probably safe to post in ways the Strawberry Shortcake strip was not – unless Nazis sue us too, in which case, I will declare the world and my life subjects which are beyond parody. Though it goes counter to what myself and many people believe about the protected nature of speech in America, were we to actually go to court over the previous comic, there is no guarantee of victory. It's not very clear cut, legally speaking. Win or lose, though, there is a guarantee that it will take all of our time and money. When it comes down to it, I would rather make comics and write my little newsposts than exhaust those energies grappling with a corporation that is large beyond imaginings. Hopefully that is something we can agree on. (Tycho, April 27, 2003)

Interestingly enough, American Greetings did not pursue legal remedy in response to the Nazi comic, suggesting that a full-on legal battle was not in the company's interest either, possibly because Tycho posited that the threat of legal action by the company was a violation to the first amendment (freedom of speech). Couple that stance with the millions of fans who stand behind Penny Arcade, and it is easy to see how Penny Arcade carries authority outside of its restricted field of production. The confrontation with American Greetings is a clear cut example of how Penny Arcade's stance against the mainstream facilitates fan loyalty and ultimately serves to enhance authenticity and credibility within the Penny Arcade subculture.


**Figure 3.7 "Read it before they take Legal Action" (2003/04/27).**

*Penny Arcade and the Foolscap Attack*

Perhaps Penny Arcade does not actively seek confrontation, but they certainly do seem to enjoy it when it befalls them. A separate instance of conflict occurred with writer Harlan Ellison, a fellow guest of honor at the 2005 Foolscap Conference. Gabe detailed the exact happenings in the newspost:

> So Tycho and I are up in front of the audience with Harlen, and Hank (the con organizer) presents us with some jester hats ("Fool's caps"). Tycho and I put ours on because we are polite, but Harlen – who is apparently too cool for school – refuses to wear his. I turn to him and say, "Don't you want your hat?" and he tells me to fuck off. This caught me off guard, I mean I have no clue who this fucking coot is. Then he points to a pad of paper he has and asks if I'm aware that his paper is also called foolscap. Now, I've never heard that term before, I pretty much just call it paper so I shake my head "no." This really isn't a fair question. I mean, it would be like me asking him about Photoshop or if he can remember what he had for lunch. The guy was essentially setting me up to look stupid in front of all these people. So then he asks me if I even

> attended college and I say "No, I did not." Then, he says "did you at least finish high school?" I said that I had, but you couldn't really hear me because the audience is laughing at me along with Harlen. So once they stop, I turn to him and I say, "While I've got you here I just wanted to say how much I enjoyed the Star Wars stuff you wrote." (Gabe, 09/26/2005)

As this excerpt indicates, both parties returned to their respective websites to relay the happenings and proceeded to "verbally" bash each other. Tycho called Ellison a "a ridiculous man, a little goblin who pokes his head out of dark holes and scowls at all the Earth. There is no room in my life for that kind of person" (Tycho, 26/05/05). One observer of the battle described the feud that ensued: "And then it was on. Penny Arcade fans ran rampant over Ellison's site, name-calling and accusing, and a few hackers tried to vandalize the site. Ellison's fans responded, generally, with more name-calling and accusing" (Robinson, October 4, 2005 ). In some ways, this reaction was no surprise to Gabe and Tycho but neither was it condoned: "Our readers took it upon themselves to destroy his page. I asked them not to, and they stopped" (Gladstone, 2006). The reaction of Penny Arcade fans is evidence of the loyalty felt towards Tycho and Gabe, and the camp-like mentality of the necessity to become involved and parade support. Because Tycho and Gabe made this encounter public knowledge to their fans, the fans were naturally riled up by such an insult and felt it was their place to attack Ellison in return.

The credibility and authenticity of Penny Arcade was also reinforced through this incident. Unbeknownst to readers at the time but divulged in a later interview, the pair had anticipated a potential conflict with Ellison and prepared that particular insult in advance, with a $100 pay-off if Gabe made a comment of that nature (Gladstone, 2006). In their run-in with Ellison, they choose a well-known and highly regarded man to do

battle with, one whom they were just as sure would instigate as they were would retaliate; Ellison carries his own cultural capital in the overlapping comic book, science fiction, and videogame circles. A dispute with Ellison would bolster Penny Arcade's credibility in the eyes of their fans and present them with an opportunity to portray themselves publicly in a way consistent with their on-site persona.

*CSI Miami: Jack Thompson*

Finally, there was the case of Jack Thompson, a Miami lawyer and an avid spokesperson against violent videogames. The Jack Thompson incident received considerable publicity and enabled Penny Arcade to enter into the large-scale field through mainstream methods while simultaneously maintaining an expressed indignancy towards it. Following a letter to a game developer, Thompson offered to donate $10,000 to charity if the developer would create a videogame about a violent gamer who kills off everyone in the videogame industry in a murderous rampage. When the company actually made such a game, Thompson backed out of his offer, calling his proposal a "satire" (Tycho, Oct 17, 2005). After unsuccessfully challenging Thompson to make good on his promise, Tycho and Gabe (aka Krahulik and Holkins) donated $10,000 of their own money to the cause in place of Thompson's donation.


**Figure 3.8 "And all of it True" (2005/10/14). Penny Arcade's public jab at lawyer Jack Thompson**

Following this, Thompson accused Penny Arcade of criminal harassment, but nothing more than a few angry email exchanges and telephone conversations came of it. Penny Arcade did their best to make this all very public, posting copies of emails and letters sent by Thompson, and detailing in interviews and on their site the exact nature of the exchange. The comic shown in Figure 3.8 appeared beside one such newspost. Thompson's very public persona was advantageous for Holkins and Krahulik, who enjoyed the publicized irony, having proved Thompson's harsh accusations about gamers wrong. In the end, Thompson looked the fool; even the National Institute on Media and the Family publicly disassociated themselves from him ("Jack Thompson is Blasted by Pro-family Group," Oct 14, 2005).

The conflict, however, didn't end there. In addition to the occasional reference to Thompson as a crazed loon and the odd comment about Thompson's most recent act of

idiocy (see Figure 3.9), the legal dispute continued when in March 2007, Thompson accused Penny Arcade of "racketeering" against him along with media company Take Two Interactive. In response, Tycho posts:

> Having obliterated [Thompson] and donated to charity in a single profound act, we are usually content to endure his most recent eruption – confident that the "nice lady" will arrive soon, in possession of the "happy needle." But seriously: racketeering? That's giving me some credit. (Tycho, 23/3/07)

Tycho goes on to address Thompson directly:

> We detest and confound you because you're an asshole. There is no greater conspiracy – or, if there is, we are not party to it. I love the idea that we act as media hitmen for hire, I love the drama and the romance of it. But it's not mystical or sinister: it's what you might call "media physics." You put out something we disagree with, and then (as by some natural inclination of the universe) we respond to it. It's still legal to disagree with you, right? I sometimes forget which country I live in. (Tycho, 23/3/07)

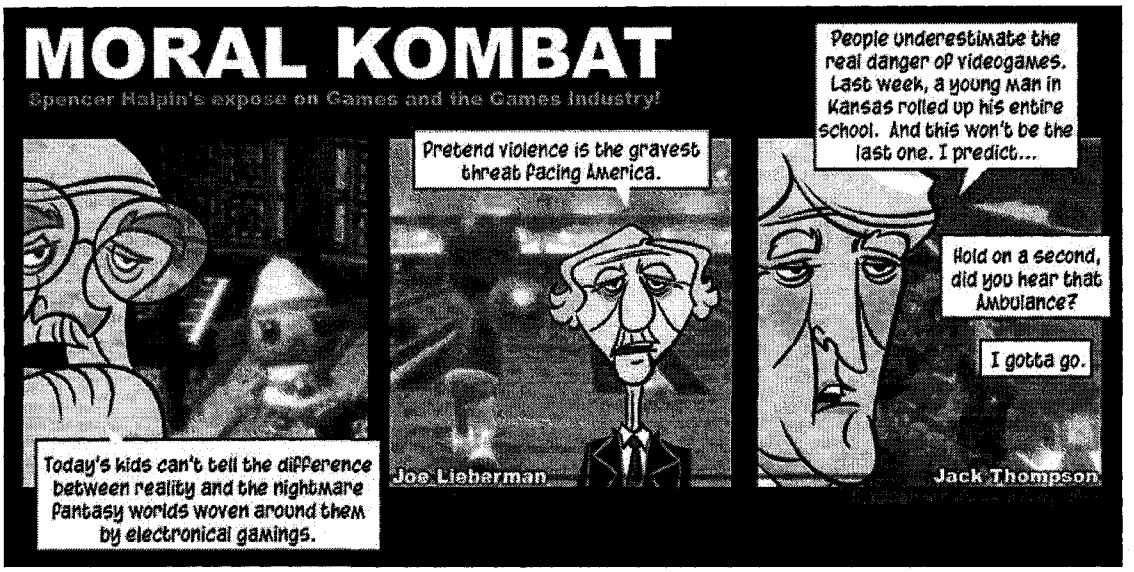


**Figure 3.9 "I see what you did there" (2007/01/05). "And there's ol' Jack, crankin' out them biblical allusions and praying for his teen apocalypse. I'm not sure he actually understands that if one of his demented fantasies comes true, that doesn't make him a prophet." (Tycho, 05/1/07)**

The ongoing denunciation of Thompson on the Penny Arcade site riles fans and inspires action. In a couple of posts Gabe explains why, due to legal implications, he is unable to give out Thompson's contact information despite the numerous email requests from mischievous fans. As a way of providing fans with an outlet for their frustration, Gabe and Tycho called Thompson on speakerphone at a Q & A session at the 2006 PAX so that I, along with thousands of fans, could "boo" at Thompson's voicemail.

It seems that the general perception among fans and other industry observers is that the missiles fired at Thompson are warranted; Thompson has even been called "a pinhead" and "paranoid" by the media (O'Neil, 191, Comics Journal). Davin encapsulates the fan enthusiasm when he says, "I think [the feud with Thompson] is hilarious. And I think it's awesome that [Penny Arcade] take a stand against that sort of idiocy." It is obvious that Penny Arcade's responses to Thompson have certainly

bolstered their popularity and garnered fan support, which has been further propagated by the selling of "anti-Jack Thompson" merchandise such as the T-shirt shown in Figure 3.5 above.

With regards to the first Thompson incident, the contrast that Thompson hoped to make backfired, as Penny Arcade was able to harness the social capital of donating money towards charity in Thompson's name, while retaining their internal subcultural capital through the selling of anti-Jack Thompson merchandise, and the use of their comic strip to communicate the situation. Furthermore, their sarcastic undertones and intelligent jabs through which the situation was handled stoked the fires of authenticity for Penny Arcade's distinct and unwavering online persona. Given that fans and outside witnesses have also supported Penny Arcade's position, Penny Arcade's credibility among its fans was enhanced, once again re-affirming fan loyalty and support.

**Selling Out: Revisited**

Counter-culture and anti-mainstream sentiments have long been an identified trait among subcultures. However; the interplay between these sentiments and the wider cultural milieu (and its associated promise of economic capital) has since complicated this simplistic perception. Thornton, in many ways, paved the way for current conceptions of the term "sell-out" and the importance of preserving authenticity, or at least the illusion of. She takes into account Hebdige's earlier assertions and makes them applicable for her own purposes:

> Dick Hebdige theorizes about "selling out" as a process of "incorporation" into the hegemony. He describes this recuperative "commercialization" as an aesthetic metamorphosis, an ideological rather than a material process whereby previously subversive subcultural signs, (such as music and clothing) are "converted" or "translated" into mass-produced commodities. (Hebdige 1979, 97)....Within club undergrounds, it seems to me that "to sell" means "to betray" and "selling out" refers to the process by which artists or songs sell beyond their initial market which, in turn, loses its sense of possession, exclusive ownership and familiar belonging. In other words, "selling out" means selling to outsiders. (124)

Thornton's very black and white definition paints a general picture of the term, but what is apparent about subcultures today is that profit and authenticity are not two mutually exclusive concepts, particularly in the music industry. Artists are forced to navigate their way through the grey area where tensions between vested interests and authenticity reside. Grazian's (2003) comments on the Chicago blues scene encapsulate this precarious dynamic:

> But in spite of this increased concern over authenticity in popular music arenas among die-hard fans who bemoan the increased commercialization that pervades all aspects of contemporary public culture, many indie-rock, hip-hop and electronica artists face the same dilemma as Chicago blues musicians – namely, how do they negotiate their way through the set of competing demands and desires for artistic autonomy and popular mainstream acceptance, local appreciation and global visibility, financial profits and subcultural credibility? (238)

What changes, however, is the ways and extent to which profit and publicity are negotiated within a given subculture so as not to compromise the subculture's credible and authentic status among its loyal insiders. In the case of Penny Arcade, the group's subcultural capital is the enabling force that allows Penny Arcade to enjoy both

mainstream profit and publicity *and* their fans' ongoing support for doing so. As Bourdieu (1993) reminds us, an artist's main goal can always be reduced to profit – the trick for the artist is to retain her consecration and status within the field of production while reaping the rewards of success ( ie. profit). By making their actions completely transparent through undercover strategies like inoculation, Penny Arcade is able to frame what may otherwise be perceived as selling out within the context of their subcultural capital.

*Selling Out? Who, ME? Penny Arcade goes "Undercover"*

When Penny Arcade first decided to go independent through the launch of their own website, both Holkins and Krahulik ran the site alongside fulltime jobs. When the site gained popularity and became more demanding, the pair decided to try and solicit donations from fans in lieu of their fulltime jobs. For a year and a half, Penny Arcade survived on fan-based donations, but eventually succumbed to the selling of advertising space on their website to larger firms (Turner, 2004) as well as to the sale of Penny Arcade/gaming merchandise. The onsite advertising reveals itself as a top banner and a side panel on every page, ranging in content from the promotion of new games to advertisements for gaming design school. It is apparent that advertisers have caught onto the success of the site and the buying potential of this unique market.

Through a combination of complacency, practicality, and identity, Penny Arcade is not rebuffed by its fans for its part in the niche-marketing of the gaming subculture. The phenomenon of marketing within subcultures is a markedly "post-subcultural" feature. According to Muggleton and Weinzierl (2003), "Subcultures of today are also

complicit in the (niche) marketing of their own identities. There is a vivid role for subcultural related practices as an entrepreneurial engine for the new media, fashion and cultural industries" (6). Part of Penny Arcade's defining characteristics are its jabs at the mainstream and so the marketing of Penny Arcade merchandise could be viewed as a selling of "counterculture," which is arguably one of the most "powerful forces driving consumerism over the last forty years" (Heath & Potter, 2004, 98). Like other examples of subcultures within a restricted field of production that have resisted selling out, Penny Arcade has undertaken aspects of consumer culture through the guise of "going undercover," whereby one subsumes to advertising and marketing while simultaneously opposing it, so as to remain "true" to a claim of independence from it (ibid., 2004). Penny Arcade has out rightly opposed advertising (as seen in Figure 3.10) and still appears to critique the industry regardless of which corporations may be advertisers on its website.

A more subtle means of going undercover occurs through Penny Arcades' willingness to openly discuss their relationship with advertisers and their position on the matter. This is acted out through McGuire's (1961) "Inoculation Message Theory," a recognized means of persuasion whereby potential criticisms or inconsistencies are pre-emptively addressed to counter impending attacks and to preserve credibility on the part of the communicator. For instance, Penny Arcade claims only to advertise games that they personally support rather than voicing support for a game because it is being advertised on their site, a pre-emptive statement that counters the potential risk of appearing to be sell-outs:

> I always worry that people won't take me seriously when I talk about a game that we have advertised on the site and . . . I rejoice that I am able to say that this is actually a good

> game and you can pay attention to it and I think that that opinion is bolstered by the fact that . . . no money changed hands, even though that we choose games that we want [to advertise] and we demand playables...It's intractable . . . I understand that we have ads – we've got ads for [Settlers of Catan] now – and we have those ads because of how enthusiastic I've been about the game, and I play it every night -- . . . I feel a little weird because it looks like I've been saying all this stuff and then "oh, here come the ads". . . I am a naturally suspicious person and that is how I would perceive it. I would perceive it as a quid-pro-quo. (Tycho, 2007)

This claim of legitimacy lends itself to the transparency and honesty fans have come to expect from Penny Arcade, and thus further enhances their credibility among gamers. This perception is successfully maintained, as is evidenced by Davin's comment: "[Penny Arcade hasn't] tried to commercialize themselves. They make a joke out of selling out but they really haven't."


**Figure 3.10 "I'll just put this right here" (2000/08/07). Penny Arcade "going undercover" against the advertising they've permitted on their site.**

Similarly, Penny Arcade culture and its surrounding artefacts are in demand and many of these products are purchased not just as a method of partaking in Penny Arcade culture, but as a way of showing fan support; this is similar to the fan-based donations that initially funded the website. Because a lot of the clothing sold by Penny Arcade is either gaming or counter-mainstream in nature, the purchasing of this merchandise is, to the gamer, more likely about identification within a subculture than it is about buying into the multi-billion dollar gaming industry. There is a fine line between Penny Arcade as an "independent" site and its affiliation with the industry itself. Penny Arcade's turn to advertising and the marketing of its own merchandise in search of economic capital is not considered to be a form of selling out. Rather, because these activities are consistent with the Penny Arcade gamer "code" and its sarcastic identity via means of going undercover, they are readily accepted and even supported by the Penny Arcade subculture.

**Conclusion**

As the chapter first demonstrated, Penny Arcade may indeed be considered a subculture in accordance with Hodkinson's four criteria. Penny Arcade exhibited components of identity, consistent distinctiveness, commitment, and autonomy – elements that were vocalized by Penny Arcade fans in detail. Members: felt identified as part of an exclusive group; shared similar tastes and values such as intelligent humour and grassroots sensibilities; consistently engaged in Penny Arcade experiences, be it attending PAX or making regular visits to the site; and exhibited a high levels of insider participation, such as volunteering for PAX or donating to Child's Play.

Secondly, this chapter considered the formation and strengthening of subcultural capital, which was manufactured through insider vocabulary, an anti-mainstream sardonic persona, and the selling and promotion of Penny Arcade merchandise. All of these characteristics helped to create an exclusive code that delineated Penny Arcade fans as authentic and further distinguished members of the subculture from non-members. Subcultural capital is further strengthened by Penny Arcade's public controversies, which summon fan allegiance and support. The cases of the American McGee/Strawberry Shortcake parody, Harlan Ellison, and Jack Thompson all convey the heightened subcultural function of these feuds; that is, through these disputes Penny Arcade reinforces its anti-mainstream (and thereby authentic) persona and strengthens member identity through antagonizing external entities.

The last part of this chapter discussed the strategy of "going undercover," whereby Penny Arcade was able to make acceptable onsite advertising by outwardly objecting to it in a way consistent with their anti-mainstream sentiments. All of the aforementioned elements form and set the expectations of subcultural capital and articulate the values of the Penny Arcade subculture.

The following chapter will discuss how Penny Arcade contradicts and thus problematizes their rebel image by embarking upon what may be considered the mainstream, sub-culturally "uncool," act of starting a charity.

# CHAPTER 4: THE MANIPULATION OF SUBCULTURAL CAPITAL

> The autonomy of a field of restricted production can be measured by its power to define its own criteria for the production and evaluation of its products . . . Thus the more cultural producers form a closed field of competition for cultural legitimacy, the more the internal demarcations appear irreducible to any external factors of economic, political or social differentiation. (Bourdieu, 1993, 115)

Up to this point, the above quote by Bourdieu appears to be an accurate description of the Penny Arcade subculture: Penny Arcade produced content specifically for gamers and under adherence to a restricted subcultural code. In alignment with this subcultural code, Penny Arcade rejected the mainstream through public feuds and by refusing to be motivated or swayed by offers or enticements of economic capital. The use of gaming lingo, Penny Arcade's anti-mainstream persona, and the selling of Penny Arcade merchandise make up their subcultural capital, and are contributing factors to unity and loyalty felt by members. While the previous chapter focused on the development and reinforcement of this expression of subcultural capital, what remains to be discussed is how this same subcultural capital enabled Penny Arcade to attain the external forms of capital (which they internally claim to be ambivalent about), without causing them to lose their position as taste-makers and leaders within their field of restricted production.

The starting of Child's Play, Penny Arcade's charity, saw subcultural capital strategically deployed as a means for making profit and publicity seeking mainstream behaviour acceptable among fans. This chapter will reveal the crucial role that

subcultural capital has played in the stability and preservation of Penny Arcade subculture by resolving tensions between otherwise contradictory and potentially questionable behaviour. This will be achieved through an analysis of the historical and cultural connotations of charitable work and will examine why Penny Arcade's decision to start Child's Play is unusual in this given context.

Following this, the work of Bourdieu as it has been applied to notions of philanthropy will be used to draw attention to the social/economic incentives of charitable giving from an external standpoint, and examples of the mainstream accolades attained will be acknowledged in this context. By inspecting the role of each of the three forms of subcultural capital in turn, the next section of this chapter will consider how this mainstream move is sold to Penny Arcade fans through what I term the "manipulation of subcultural capital."

Finally, the chapter will conclude with an evaluation of the strength and usage of Penny Arcade's deployment of subcultural capital in contributing to their ongoing success in both the large-scale and the restricted field of production; this synopsis will reveal that Penny Arcade's anti-mainstream persona and merchandising are the most dualistically adaptable forms of subcultural capital and are instrumental in the successful accruement of external forms of capital, while the third form, insider vocabulary, remains a markedly unifying and exclusive force. Because of the strategic employment of subcultural capital, Penny Arcade's subcultural identity and solidarity cannot be transgressed or hindered by their profit and publicity-seeking behaviour.

**Gestures of Goodwill**

Historically, charitable giving was reserved for society's elite and upper classes, those who had enough disposable time and income to be concerned with such matters. The "Good Samaritan" act of giving was very much linked to the Christian church, one of the key propagators of the virtuous and pious perception of charity. Charity and traditional notions of giving were inspired by "the Manchester school of political economy, Malthusianism, and Social Darwinism" (Schneiderhan, 2006, 4), with charitable organization making its first appearance in America around the year 1871 (Schneiderhan, 2006). As one of the major influences to charitable giving in America, Manchester society saw "involvement with local charities, entering the 'charity field,' [as associated] with notions of care, benevolence and Christian duty, making leaders appear as altruistic and morally upstanding members of the community" (Shapely, 1998, 157). Later on in his paper, Shapely elaborates, "Voluntary charities provided the ideal base for displays of such apparent generosity, religious virtue and public spiritedness. It was a display of moral duty which ostensibly showed the charitable were fulfilling duties associated with the social citizenship of the late nineteenth century" (Shapely, 1998, 10). Further, it would seem that the very act of giving is suspect to the advancement of one's own personal interest, causing cynicism about the motivating factors behind the seemingly altruistic act (Kidd, 1996); accordingly, there is reason to investigate the intentionality behind philanthropic endeavours, with Penny Arcade's Child's Play being no exception.

Shapely and his Bourdieu-ian analysis of charity in Victorian Manchester provides us with a more accurate look at the sociological incentives for giving as they

pertain to the accruement of the varying forms of capital within a given field. According to Bourdieu, position taking results from economic capital, cultural capital, social capital and symbolic capital, such as attaining recognition and consecration within autonomous field of cultural production (Bourdieu, 1986). Symbolic capital, in particular, is valued according to its place on the consecration hierarchy through the autonomous principle of hierarchization, the extend to which an artist is recognized by members of its field (Bourdieu, 1993).

As mentioned, the Penny Arcade subculture can be considered a restricted field of production in juxtaposition to the large-scale field of production. Subcultural and symbolic capital remain important currencies within the restricted field of production, but through the starting of a charity as a bridge into the larger field of production, Penny Arcade gains access to economic and social capital and ultimately external symbolic capital. The opportunities created by charitable giving and philanthropic endeavors are duly noted by Shapely, as charitable giving rewarded those members of society with prestige and respect, and in the very act, communicated to the public the degree of economic and cultural capital held by the giver: "Charity was a vital means of acquiring or reinforcing [philanthropists'] symbolic capital and social position [as] . . . local leaders who had displayed moral worth and value to the community" (Shapely, 1998, 157). Participation in charities allots donors with publicity, financial incentives, and a favourable social standing. All of these benefits reduce down to primarily economic and social capital, both ultimately convertible into symbolic capital. According to Bourdieu,

> Owing to the fact that symbolic capital is nothing other than economic or cultural capital when it is known and

> recognized, when it is known through the categories of perception that it imposes, symbolic relations of power tend to reproduce and to reinforce the power relations that constitute the structure of social space. (Bourdieu, 1986, 21)

Remnants of the traditional Victorian perception still exist in today's society, as celebrity philanthropy has become an increasingly trendy and popular way of garnering and bolstering publicity. From Bono to Oprah, the recent trend in charitable causes has made philanthropy a notably mainstream endeavour, and for good reason. The strong links between money, lineage, and social standing (obvious markers of cultural capital) in Britain has been somewhat lost in current day America, where the nouveau riche diminished the aforementioned forms of cultural capital associated with "old money" and replaced it with a cheap and easily bought form of social capital. "The fact that it takes movie stars to make people care about pressing human rights struggles reflects a self-absorbed culture where compassion and empathy is awakened through glamour rather than human conscience and duty" (Akhavan quoted in Boustany, 2007). Notwithstanding cultural capital, acts of charity continue to be an indicator of social and, at the very least, economic standing. It is the current trendiness of celebrity philanthropy which has resulted in its mainstream positioning in the field of cultural production. Keeping this understanding in mind, along with traditional notions of charitable giving, it is easy to see why the act of starting up a charity is incongruent with Penny Arcade's socially blasé persona – such an integral part of their subcultural capital.

**Child's Play: The Gamers' Charity**

The charitable donation made by Penny Arcade in the Jack Thompson case was reasonably consistent with their contumacious attitude, as the action was intended to make Thompson look bad. Whereas in the Thompson case, Penny Arcade's charitable donation was portrayed to fans as vengeance for Thompson's behavior, the starting of Child's Play came about as a genuine goodwill gesture in early 2003. Instead of helplessly accepting the accusations directed at videogames and those who played them, Penny Arcade's creators sought to counter the negative hype that surrounded videogames and gaming culture. Rather than critiquing dominant stereotypes internally to their fan-base as they had done in the past through the comic and newspost, Child's Play was a means by which Penny Arcade founders Holkins and Krahulik decided to manifest this protest externally. According to the Child's Play website, "We set it up because we were angry the media decided to blame all the world's problems on games and gamers. Basically they said that gamers were bad people, and we thought that wasn't right" (Gabe, 2003).

Child's Play is a children's charity that donates gifts (usually videogame oriented in nature) to sick children in hospitals every Christmas. The charity encourages Penny Arcade fans to purchase toys from a central website to be donated to more than 30 different partner-hospitals throughout North America, the UK, and even Australia (Tycho, Nov 3, 2006). Holkins and Krahulik appeal to their fans for donations in their newsposts during the Christmas season and make a point of referring to the charity daily throughout the holidays. To date, Penny Arcade reports it has raised over one million dollars in their 2006 run alone (childsplaycharity.org). This impressive contribution

coupled with Child's Play's unusual origins does not align with traditional notions of charitable giving and philanthropy.

As previously alluded to, charitable giving has often been undertaken by those in a high cultural and social standing, from a reasonably predictable demographic of middle aged, upper to middle class citizens. When contrasted with the million dollars donated by Penny Arcade's audience demographic of mostly male Penny Arcade fans ranging from (on average) 14-24 in age (Gabe, Nov 24, 2003), most of whom contend with some of the more typical social stereotypes about gamers (see Chapter 3), the unusual nature of this particular instance of altruism is visible and reason enough to warrant the attention of the mainstream media.

**Move to the Mainstream: A Penny for some Capital?**

Child's Play was as positively received by the mainstream as it was by Penny Arcade fans. Penny Arcade has succeeded at attaining social and economic capital within the large-scale field of cultural production because of the mainstream associations attached to charitable and philanthropic acts, with additional attention being garnered in light of the unusual nature of the giving. As the "voice of gamers," Penny Arcade took it upon themselves to refute some of the media's negative claims about the gamer population, in particular an article by journalist Bill France that reportedly cast gamers in a negative light. The Child's Play website reiterates the original Penny Arcade newspost that explains this as the initial motivation behind starting Child's Play, followed by an impassioned call to action direct at Penny Arcade readers:

> If you are like me, every time you see an article like [France's], where the author claims that video games are training our nations youth to kill, you get angry. The media seems intent on perpetuating the myth that gamers are ticking time bombs just waiting to go off. I know for a fact that gamers are good people. I have had the opportunity on multiple occasions to meet hundreds of you at conventions all over the country. We are just regular people who happen to love video games.
>
> Penny Arcade has a readership of something like four and a half million[3] gamers across the world. We are arguably the largest community of gamers on the internet. The important word there being community . . .We are not a faceless corporation, you are not just a number tracked by a database and then relayed to hungry advertisers. You guys have proven yourselves to be a powerful force when stirred into action. Here is your opportunity to use that power to do some real good. (Gabe, Nov 24, 2003)

Outside of the internal promotion of the charity, Penny Arcade has accrued much publicity for its cause. Following the initial press release by Penny Arcade, newspapers all over the continent picked up the story of two gamers who are "putting the media's negative portrayals of videogames to shame, and showing the world that gamers are good people" (PR_Newswire, 2004). Their actions even received a public apology from the journalist who wrote the article that stirred Penny Arcade to action:

> Certainly many gamers read my column as a statement that I believe that they are bad people. For that impression I am sorry. I did not and do not believe that. In any case, the Penny-arcade Web site and many of their readers, who are apparently gamers, demonstrated that they have big hearts and generous instincts." (France quoted in Gabe, 2006a)

---

[3] This number is based on a 2007 stat was supplied by Robert Khoo, business director for Penny Arcade. The original stat listed in the 2003 quote was 150 000.

The media has responded in an extremely positive manner. Stories on Penny Arcade, which have been numerous in recent years, almost always frame Child's Play as Penny Arcade's one worthwhile and redeeming quality: "Founded with the express purpose of countering the negative image of gamers and gaming as a hobby often regurgitated by a sensationalist and lazy news media, the organization has succeeded admirably at doing an incontrovertibly unselfish and noble thing" (Gladstone, 2006). As the name of the article from which this quote was taken suggests, Penny Arcade is "more than just comic relief" in the eyes of the media, thanks to Child's Play. Holkins and Krahulik were even named one of the top 25 people of 2006 by Next Generation (Campbell, 2006), further enhancing their public reputation.

Penny Arcade's initial motivation of trying to change the reputation of gamers has been somewhat successful, at least based on the plethora of accolades they boast on the Child's Play website. One well-known gaming blogger commented, "Everyone who produces Penny Arcade, and everyone who reads Penny Arcade, did an amazing, thoughtful, kind and compassionate act. They should be recognized for what they did, and that's what I'm doing today" (Wil Wheaton quoted in Penny_Arcade, 2006). According to the press release taken up by many newspapers, the results are conclusive: "This unique [charity] event . . . has proven that video game enthusiasts are philanthropic, socially aware, and very generous" (PR_Newswire, 2004). Even Penny Arcade gamers think that the media attention is a good thing and consistent with the internal messaging driving Child's Play:

> B: I think the charity work they do with the Child's Play promotions gives gamers a voice. Every year they get a lot of local news coverage. I don't know if they get national

> coverage but certainly they know which TV sites to have come in and interview them about that. That, in addition to the good that they actually do with children's hospitals, [puts a] a positive face on gaming culture.

As evidenced by this steady stream of positive feedback and praise, the success of the charity allots Penny Arcade with both economic and social capital – not just in the form of media publicity, but also in the form of corporate sponsorship. Penny Arcade is able to use its influential position in the gaming industry to get a fair share of large gaming companies either to donate items for the charity auction and/or to sign-off on large cheques to Child's Play in exchange for the social capital of being affiliated with Penny Arcade. A gaming promotions website, GamesTrailers.com, donated a cheque for $10,000 at the 2006 charity auction dinner; other big name companies have donated and, in turn, received the privilege of having their company logo on the home page of the Child's Play website. "Game publishers . . . want to ensure games get a vote of approval from Penny Arcade because most games 'have to cater to the avid gamers first'" (Bachus quoted in Turner, 2004). Similarly, a donation to Child's Play instantly earns gaming companies the social capital of having their name linked to Penny Arcade and the "gamers' charity" and it is a round-about, but strategic, way of constructing a favourable self-image in the eyes of Penny Arcade fans.

**Subcultural Capital**

Having established that Penny Arcade's move to start a charity is a decidedly mainstream pursuit, the way by which the charity is presented to members of the

subculture becomes a delicate and strategic manoeuvre which must be enacted with the utmost sensitivity and regard for the volatile nature of member loyalty. Despite the obvious mainstream and "uncool" connotations with charitable work and celebrity charity, Penny Arcade is able to maintain the support and even recruit participation in this endeavour, without being perceived as "selling out." Because Child's Play is successful on both fronts – as a strengthening force internally among members of the subculture and as a means of garnering additional forms of capital from the mainstream, Penny Arcade is able to retain and strengthen member solidarity while at the same time enjoying the benefits accrued from the mainstream forms of capital awarded them. In this section, I will discuss how this has all been made possible by the strategic and deliberate application of Penny Arcade's subcultural capital.

While all three forms of capital were equally essential in strengthening Penny Arcade's identity and loyalty as was demonstrated in Chapter 3, not all three forms of subcultural capital were equally useful or employed as a means of attaining external forms of capital. As this section will show, it was Penny Arcade's anti-mainstream persona as an inherent reflection of Penny Arcade's unique set of gamer tastes and values with the support of the Child's Play (Penny Arcade) merchandising that were instrumental to Penny Arcade's successful accumulation of mainstream profit and publicity. Insider vocabulary, the third form of identified subcultural capital, remains an important part of authenticating Penny Arcade membership and identity, but fails to be as adaptable as the other forms of subcultural capital in its external/internal functionality. Because Penny Arcade's success in maintaining its "gamer cred" whilst successfully

achieving external capital relies heavily on its sardonic anti-mainstream persona and the tastes and values contained therein, it will be discussed first. The roles of the remaining two forms of capital, Penny Arcade merchandising and insider vocabulary, will succeed this discussion.

**A Penny's Worth: Converting Values to Action**

As previously explicated, Penny Arcade relies heavily on anti-mainstream sentiments in constructing their identity. These sentiments have become an implicit part of the subculture's unique catalogue of tastes and values, most obviously reflected in their distinctive style of humour. Bourdieu (1993) articulates this dynamic of insider rejection and ambivalence towards the mainstream "others":

> It is significant that the appearance of an autonomous "bourgeois" public, and the interruption of collective production or advertising for cultural products, coincides with the rejection of bourgeois aesthetics and with the methodical attempt to distinguish the artist and the intellectual from other commoners by positing the unique products of "creative genius" against interchangeable products, utterly and completely reducible to their commodity value. (114)

Having already established itself as an exclusive subculture in relation to the mainstream, Penny Arcade had little trouble making a case for starting up Child's Play by antagonizing the mainstream media and the public at large. Stereotypes against gamers were already a hot topic in the Penny Arcade comic and newsposts and the notion of gamers being a misunderstood and socially alienated group made its way into many satirical references, thus laying the ground work for taking this dualistic positioning to a level of action. Based on their initial justification for beginning the charity and this pre-

established framework of opposition, the united front that followed was hardly a surprise. From Andy's industry perspective, the strategic aspect behind starting up Child's Play was markedly clear but did not override what he perceives to be Penny Arcade's underlying value system:

> I'm sure that the impression most people get when they hear that [Child's Play] is . . . compatible with gaming (that has this reputation for somehow sullying children), is a pretty powerful statement for people who assume that it's an overall negative form of media for kids. I think it was a really smart strategic move against Jack Thompson and that definitely put [Penny Arcade] on the moral high ground. It gives them a lot more legitimacy and it also fits that [Holkins and Krahulik are] having kids so as their kids grow up and they're seen as parents as well as gamers, suddenly it's hard to see them as somehow so rebellious or [as] thumbing their nose at the world when they are parents themselves and they're doing these charities for kids. I think it's definitely a brilliant strategic move, but I don't think they did it because it was a strategic move, they did it because they had the resources to do it and they're really great guys and they always thought that they should, if they got enough power, do something really special with that power, and they're doing it. So to me it matches [everything] else they're doing. I'm inclined to think it was a very sincere and luckily also, very strategic smart move for them.

Penny Arcade's rhetoric behind Child's Play tends to be echoed by Penny Arcade fans, a good indicator of the level of identification taken on by members of the subculture and a means of legitimating their loyalty and support. As the voice of gamers, Penny Arcade's goal to improve the reputation of gamers becomes the goal of their fans as well; accordingly, the success of Child's Play becomes the success of Penny Arcade fans. As Cody remarks:

> I think it was really responsible of [Penny Arcade] to realize that they have all these people coming to their website and they had to do something better with it than just talk about videogames. I think it was a reaction to when the media was starting to focus on the violence in the gaming industry, that they felt that they needed to be responsible as leaders for a large group of people and move in a positive direction and I respected that and that definitely gives them favour in my opinion over just going to any old website to read about games.

The level of personal investment in Child's Play is also reflected in Davin's comments, which certainly suggest a need to clear up social misunderstandings about gamers and to prove to society that gamers are good people:

> I think [Child's Play is] awesome. I donated something a couple of years ago, but I think it's just a brilliant idea. The amount of toys and the amount of good that [Penny Arcade] have done in this world just by Child's Play alone shows that people like Jack Thompson are wrong, small, petty. It's this thing that benefits so many children and gamers as well because it shows people who we are and that you don't usually meet gamers who are assholes. They might be snarky, they might be kind of rude sometimes, but they're nice, they like helping people.

The reputation of gamers in this context serves as a united front that gives gamers a personal stake in the charity, thereby empowering them to step-up to the cause; by


**Figure 4.1 Spreading the Cause. A flyer posted on childsplaycharity.org**

improving the mainstream reputation of gamers, they may also gain social acceptance for their often socially stigmatized hobby. Child's Play offers gamers an outlet where they can demonstrate their devotion and partake in Hodkinson's subcultural concept of "commitment," either by donating to the charity or participating in the promotion of the cause. Penny Arcade gives gamers ample means of spreading the word, including a print-out flyer appealing to potential donors (See Figure 4.1). Contributing and promoting Child's Play becomes the duty of the Penny Arcade fan, thus becoming an important characteristic of Penny Arcade's membership identification:

> B: I think that they're combating that lazy antisocial stereotype [of gamers] and instead replacing it with a group of people who care about things who aren't just a group of ambivalent teenagers and there are things that they feel strongly about. So if people could see that then they might not vilify videogames in the way that particularly legislators seem to do. It humanizes a group that people . . . might not really know anything about.

What Brian implies in this quote is that the intentionality behind Child's Play has manifested itself in a new value of Penny Arcade fans. Whereas before, Penny Arcade's values were expressed through their role as taste-makers within the videogame industry, the starting of Child's Play has introduced the new value of altruism and duty to the Penny Arcade subculture. Child's Play has become an important feature of the Penny Arcade subculture, one that works with the group's subcultural capital to strengthen feelings of membership loyalty and unity, serving as a point of pride for most Penny Arcade fans. The Child's Play website promotes the charity as "the Gamers' charity," suggesting that the charity is ultimately about the self-preservation of the hobby whereby gamers are able to proliferate videogame playing by ensuring that sick kids in hospitals are able to play videogames; in other words, it's about gamers helping gamers. The concept of a gamer community is a recurring theme in the promotion of Child's Play.

The media section of the Child's Play website totes a special solicitation to student journalists who are able to reach parents as well as students with their reporting, explaining that "a story that shows that gamers aren't ticking timebombs would go a long way to repairing the damage caused by sensational negative media" (Gabe, 2006b; Penny_Arcade, 2006).[4] In this way, Penny Arcade fans not only are called upon as financial contributories making the charity possible in the first place, but are also called

---

[4] It is interesting to note that in many cases, parents are the financial enablers of some of the younger gaming enthusiasts, as both donators to Child's Play and the key purchasers of gaming paraphernalia. From a cynical standpoint, one might make the observation that improving the reputation of gamers among parents would serve a ripple of interests throughout the gaming industry in addition to benefiting sick children in hospitals.

upon to promote and "evangelize" (Gabe, 2003) the charity to fellow gamers, media, and hospitals in their area. In proselytizing the cause, Gabe writes:

> I don't have any misconceptions about what exactly Penny Arcade is. We're not making Peanuts here or For Better or Worse. I don't expect I'll still be drawing the adventures of Gabe and Tycho when I'm seventy. It's commentary on a community moving so fast that our material from two years ago might as well be ancient history. We try to be topical and entertaining three times a week and we'll keep doing that as long as you keep reading it. If anything we've created here on the interweb will still be around when Tycho and I are old men I hope its Child's Play. Even if we're not making Penny Arcade cartoons in thirty years, I still expect to be on stage sometime around December in front of an audience full of gamers hosting the Child's Play charity dinner and auction. (Gabe, Nov 10, 2006)

Penny Arcade invites the gamer to contribute to the charity and by extension the Penny Arcade gamer legacy by drawing upon the traditional philanthropic values of altruism and idealism.

What further legitimizes Penny Arcade's mainstream actions and aligns them with their internal subcultural values is that despite their mainstream publicity, Penny Arcade has managed to promote and present the charity through the sardonic style that their fans had come to expect from them.


**Figure 4.2 "Dark Truths" (2003/12/03). Here Penny Arcade initiates Child's Play into their field of restricted production via their use of subcultural capital.**

The comic depicted in Figure 4.2 demonstrates Penny Arcade's incorporation of the charity as consistent with their internal identity and style, laced with their dry trademark sarcasm loved by their fans. In this way, the charity became part of Penny Arcade's identity. Coupled with the goal of the charity being to confront mainstream opinions about gamers, Penny Arcade fans find themselves united in a goal that is personally relevant for each and every one of them as gamers *and* as Penny Arcade fans. The charity is indeed being promoted by Penny Arcade as something that every gamer has a responsibility to contribute to, and that is to defend against the unjust attacks of the mainstream media in honour of gamers everywhere.

Similar to the way Penny Arcade has dealt with the contradictions in their identity and their decision to accept onsite advertising, Penny Arcade has addressed the apparent contradiction between their anti-mainstream persona and their sudden mission to change

public opinion about gamers and appeal for mainstream support head-on. In trying to reconcile this mainstream vie for social capital with the internal sardonic image of Penny Arcade, Penny Arcade reverts back to a duty of "social responsibility". In an interview, Holkins was asked about the "incongruity" between Penny Arcade's external good deeds and the maintenance of Penny Arcade's mean sense of humour internally. His response: "I don't have a great answer for it, other than to say that just because we are, you know, bad people, that doesn't really absolve us of our responsibility in that way. Just because we're people that have a strange sense of humor, that doesn't mean that we don't have to do our part in other social ways" (Drake, 2005). Because Penny Arcade has refused to compromise its image through a taming of its blunt and profanity-filled web persona, fans of Penny Arcade have stood behind the web comic, while simultaneously offering donations for the charity, thus supporting Penny Arcade's mainstream efforts at attaining social capital. The values being promoted internally within the Penny Arcade subculture as part of Penny Arcade's subcultural capital make up the core strength behind the charity and simultaneously disguise the scent of mainstream capital that permeates this scene.

*Merchandising*

The second feature of subcultural capital that aids Penny Arcade in the successful accruement of external social and economic capital is merchandising. Child's Play and its surrounding events proliferate two types of merchandising. The first instance involves Penny Arcade branded items auctioned off at Penny Arcade's fundraising dinner and on the site itself. The second instance is a more obvious form of Penny Arcade identification and promotion, and that is a unique line of Child's Play merchandise which

simultaneously serves as a tool of authentication and as mainstream promotion for Child's Play. Both aspects of merchandising are important means of fostering and using subcultural capital for internal and external purposes.

The charity has resulted in many other means of fundraising in the name of Child's Play. Penny Arcade has put on a yearly charity dinner which includes a silent auction. Herein lies another avenue of soliciting fan donations and support using a similar thread of pathos:

> The Penny Arcade charity dinner and auction is a swanky fundraising event held once a year in Bellevue, Washington. The evening begins Wednesday December 13th at 6:30 pm on the 4th floor of the Meydenbauer center. Hors d'oeuvres and wine will be served while we all get a chance to mingle and check out some silent auction items. At 7:30 the dinner will commence as well as the live auction which is hosted by Tycho and I. (Gabe, Nov 10, 2006)

Money is raised at this event by auctioning off coveted Penny Arcade paraphernalia: one-of-a-kind original Penny Arcade drawings; exclusive PAX banners and souvenirs; even a character appearance in the upcoming Penny Arcade videogame. To attend the $125 per seat dinner is a definite pronouncement of subcultural capital; to win one of these items at the auction not only earns one the respect of his fellow gamers, but direct recognition from the Penny Arcade guys themselves. Many of these items can also be bid on via the website where the presence of Gabe and Tycho embellishes the prestige attached to owning the items. In the following newspost, Gabe does exactly this:

> I've put a bunch of original artwork up for auction. These are all pencil sketches on 8.5 by 11 sheets of white printer paper. I don't actually sell original sketches like this. The

> only way you can get them is when I do these Charity auctions. (Gabe, Nov 10, 2006)

The charity drive provides an opportunity for fans to receive public acclaim by Penny Arcade. Those who find creative ways of raising money or those who make large monetary contributions have a good chance of receiving a direct address in the day's newspost, thereby earning official authentication of their membership through overt recognition of their fan dedication and loyalty.

The other more overt means of merchandising comes from the Child's Play logo and a small corresponding line of products. Originally thought to resemble the well-known Red Cross logo, Penny Arcade put a "gamer-spin" on the design by situating a first-aid type cross inside a videogame hand controller. Available exclusively through the Penny Arcade website, and interestingly enough *not* through the Child's Play website, are Child's Play t-shirts and Child's Play greeting cards (see Figure 4.3). In light of this fact, it is obvious that Child's Play merchandise is targeted at Penny Arcade fans and not at the public donor. The Child's Play logo therefore acts as yet another type of "insider knowledge" while at the same time promoting the charity by placing the Child's Play URL on the back side of the shirt.

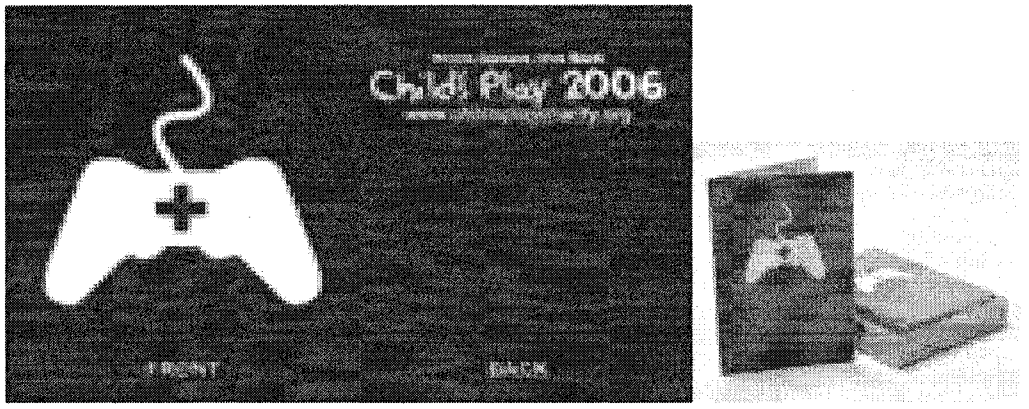


**Figure 4.3 Child's Play Merchandise. A preview of the Child's Play t-shirt and greeting card set available exclusively on penny-arcade.com**

It is the Child's Play association with Penny Arcade that remains shared by only those familiar with or part of Penny Arcade's subculture. For all others, the logo and name Child's Play refers to a charity without indicating Penny Arcade's affiliation. In this way, Penny Arcade is able to reinforce their internal subcultural capital and simultaneously promote their charity and attain the social capital publicly attached to it.

*Insider Vocabulary: You are what you speak*

Though not directly instrumental on the forefront in the successful accumulation of external capital via Child's Play, the third identified form of Penny Arcade's subcultural capital, insider vocabulary, maintains an important background role in providing Penny Arcade with a strong foundation and sense of member exclusivity. As a benchmark of authenticity, insider vocabulary filters out the casual gamer/site visitor from the Penny Arcade purists. The jokes and references to gaming culture requires that one must necessarily be a fully integrated member of the gaming culture so as to authenticate himself as an official gamer through one's comprehension of the subculture.

Unlike Penny Arcade's anti-mainstream persona and their merchandise that have dualistic internal and external functions, Penny Arcade's insider vocabulary cannot be transgressed in this way. The insider vocabulary is such that it cannot be permeated by the mainstream; accordingly, it is a pure, non-transmutable form of capital and serves as the fulcrum of Penny Arcade's credibility and authentic status within their restricted field.

**An Evaluation of Subcultural Capital**

Penny Arcade's philanthropic endeavours would not likely have been nearly as successful if it weren't for the strength of its subcultural capital. Both its anti-mainstream persona and its referentially-based merchandising system have been integral to the sustainability of Penny Arcade's role as taste-leaders in the videogame industry, reinforcing their credibility and authenticity and making Child's Play an overall success. Backed by millions of followers, the subcultural capital facilitated therein has enabled Penny Arcade to start and run a charity that accrues them mainstream forms of capital and simultaneously maintains and even bolsters feelings of solidarity within their subculture.

Despite mainstream publicity and profit-seeking behaviours that are normally considered distasteful among Penny Arcade fans, Penny Arcade is as popular as ever. What this section demonstrated is that the tenacity of their subcultural capital makes this dynamic possible. Ultimately, Penny Arcade's subcultural capital can withstand and adapt to external accumulations of capital without causing the internal structuring of the

subculture to collapse. It is Penny Arcade's anti-mainstream persona and merchandising that are adaptable to the accruement of both internal and external capital, but as this chapter showed, it is the subcultural capital indicative of insider status that is maintained by Penny Arcade's exclusive language that contributes to the steadfast, unyielding preservation of the Penny Arcade subculture. Communicating action in a way consistent with Penny Arcade's overall subcultural capital has earned Jerry Holkins and Mike Krahulik high degrees of symbolic capital in both the restricted and large-scale fields of production.

**Subcultural Capital Prevails**

The ultimate goal of this chapter was to test the durability of the aforementioned subcultural capital by delving into how the contentious social and subcultural implications of the founding of a children's charity are minimized by Penny Arcade's use of subcultural capital, thereby ensuring this action to be both an internally and externally beneficial move. Through an initial look at how the idea of philanthropy has socially evolved throughout time, and by subjecting that perception to a Bourdieu-ian analysis, the mainstream attention received by Child's Play can be understood in terms of capital and the benefits contained therein. The socially communicated success of Child's Play has led to an increase in Penny Arcade's overall symbolic capital. From an internal subcultural standpoint, the support and participation in Child's Play by Penny Arcade fans serves as a testament to the successful manipulation of subcultural capital. This was demonstrated by looking at how the correct and timely delivery of Penny Arcade's tastes

and values, as portrayed by their anti-mainstream persona, was able to introduce the charity to the members of the subculture in a way consistent with their preconceived identity as a Penny Arcade fan. In addition, the creation of a unique Child's Play logo that signified member support and loyalty while simultaneously promoting the charity was another means by which subcultural capital was used to both internally and externally serve the interests of Penny Arcade. All three forms of capital, including gamer vocabulary, demonstrate the tenacity needed to uphold Penny Arcade's credibility and override, even support, actions that are contrary to the fundamental aspects of Penny Arcade's identity.

# CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

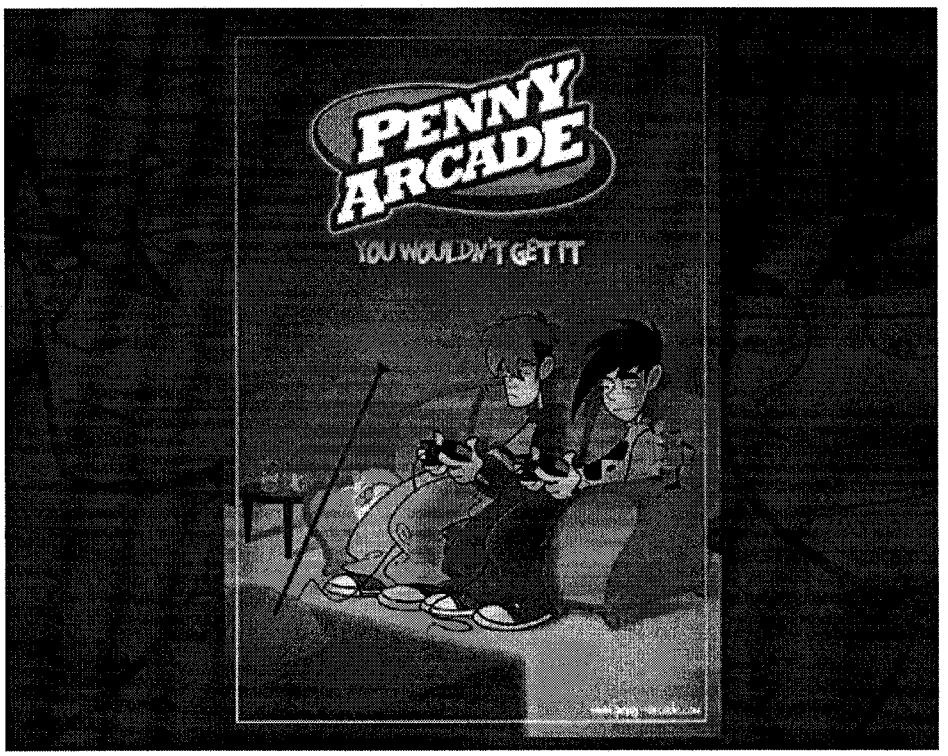


**Figure 5.1 "You Wouldn't Get it" (2003/10/03)**

There can be little question that Penny Arcade has cultivated (intentionally or unintentionally) an exclusive subculture that exists within the wider gaming culture. Access to this subculture requires, firstly, a standing relationship and background knowledge of Penny Arcade and, secondly, active participation in gaming and gaming culture. The social stigma attached to videogames and those who play them makes Penny Arcade and its surrounding subculture tremendously appealing to this culturally marginalized and socially ostracized group of individuals. Penny Arcade offers gamers a voice within the gaming industry, and with Child's Play, a voice in the mainstream as well. The restricted accessibility of the Penny Arcade subculture guarantees these

individuals exclusivity and a sense of belonging through the establishment of subcultural capital which, in many ways, acts as a filtration system so that only the most authentic Penny Arcade fans will be granted access by way of their level of understanding. This concluding chapter will review some of the key findings of this study, summarize the importance of studying gamer subcultures and outline some of the major implications that come out of this particular study. Penny Arcade can be viewed as a testament to the important but often overlooked role of subcultural capital and the opportunities it can potentially afford. While I have been able to make certain observations from this research, any contribution I have made is only a small piece of the larger social and cultural scope pertaining to gaming culture and the theoretical cultural economy. Accordingly, in the final section, I hope to bring to light some of the areas that have been left open for further investigation and study.

It was the intention of this thesis to make sense of the unique circumstances which have enabled Penny Arcade to carryout the contradictory action of starting up a children's charity and simultaneously retain symbolic capital within their own field *and* gain symbolic capital in the mainstream field. Chapter 3 suggested that Penny Arcade's subcultural identity was founded through the application of subcultural capital, which created an exclusive membership and a strong sense of loyalty among fans. The Penny Arcade subculture is a mesh of comic book, gamer, and web-comic fields; this enables it unify several socially marginalized fields and bring them together under one subculture. Using Hodkinson's criteria of identity, consistent distinctiveness, commitment, and autonomy, Penny Arcade's subcultural attributes were reviewed. Penny Arcade's unique role as taste-leaders of this subculture led to the subsequent creation of subcultural

capital, manifested through the exclusive insider vocabulary, their sardonic anti-mainstream style, and their referential merchandising system. As Chapter 3 further demonstrated, Penny Arcade has often positioned themselves in opposition to the mainstream, lashing out against public figures or major corporations and conceding to advertising while at the same time rejecting it in principle. As gamers themselves, Penny Arcade founders Holkins and Krahulik are able to bridge the gap between themselves and their fans and are more easily able to position themselves as the voice of gamers. Their high level of symbolic capital and credibility among gamers is a culmination of this and the use of their subcultural capital.

The above foundation laid the groundwork for Chapter 4, which investigated in greater detail the implications of Child's Play on Penny Arcade's positioning in both the restricted and large-scale fields of cultural production. Despite their obvious disavowal of mainstream forms of capital, their mainstream success became the success of gamers everywhere – a feat that symbolized the public bolstering of the often negatively depicted image of gamers and nerds by the media. Penny Arcade has been able to use the power given to them by their fan base to accrue symbolic capital both internal and external to their subculture.

The dynamic studied here illustrates that subcultural capital is not just another feature of subcultures, but can actually be an important tool in altering the cultural position of a given subculture. If strategically applied, specific expressions of subcultural capital can be used in both mainstream and internal situations, as was the case when Child's Play became one of Penny Arcade's internal values which propelled gamers to action and ultimately bolstered Penny Arcade's mainstream image. This suggests that the

restricted field of production and the large-scale field of production are not necessarily mutually exclusive position-takings. When a subculture enters into the mainstream with the support of its members and when these members have a personal stake in this action, the subculture stands a much greater chance of attaining external forms of capital than when the leaders of the subculture isolate their actions and breakaway from their following. Ultimately, the ability of a subculture to transfer over into the mainstream is only as good as the strength of its subcultural capital.

The content presented here was focused specifically on the execution of subcultural capital and not so much on the identity of the Penny Arcade fans themselves. While Penny Arcade fans participated in this research, this study was not able to gather data on the specific demographics of Penny Arcade fans or account for the predominant number of white Caucasians that flooded the floors at PAX. If this demographic constitution was culturally different, the findings of this study may have varied as well. Further investigation into the gender and cultural makeup would be an important contribution to research done on gaming subcultures.

This thesis focused predominantly on the subcultural dynamics within the field of cultural production rather than attempting to explain *why* Penny Arcade has such appeal and popularity. When attempting to answer this question, the plethora of fields and subfields that are conjoined under the overarching umbrella of the Penny Arcade subculture must be considered. The values that are represented by Penny Arcade serve as a unifying force and are an important component of their subcultural capital. The question that needs to be addressed is this: do members of each of these subfields share intrinsic characteristics that cause them to share similar tastes, senses of humour or other

interests, and are these values simply articulated by Penny Arcade? Or, conversely, are these values unique to Penny Arcade?

The effectiveness of subcultural capital may well be dependent upon the activation of pre-existing and intrinsic values, but Penny Arcade's widespread appeal and huge following may come down to more than just a sharing of values. Here I would like to give mention to the ambiguous concept of "charisma." The notion of charisma was discussed as one of the reasons why Penny Arcade became the chosen voice of gamers worldwide; however, this concept remains largely unacknowledged and continues to be conveyed as an inexplicable element in winning over or swaying large numbers of people. Penny Arcade's charisma was reflected in their anti-mainstream persona and quirky sense of humour (which all gamers seem to share) but the exact reason for Penny Arcade's and other highly influential persons' popularity cannot be so easily accounted for. The concept of charisma, namely, what is charisma, would be a valuable subject for future study.

On a final note, my personal characteristics such as appearance, gender, and age may have influenced how my interview participants related to me. I acknowledge that my responses from my participants as a non-gaming female might have been different were I an avid male gamer and Penny Arcade fan. Because I was familiar with Penny Arcade, I was able to share in most of the website references, but there were many game-related references that I needed to ask my participants to clarify for me. If the subcultural capital of this group is as strong as this study indicates, it would no doubt be heightened if this same or similar research was undertaken with a male gamer and fellow Penny Arcade fan. The method of interviewing may also have produced different results for analysis. I

opted for a telephone interview because most of my participants were from all over North America and to have conducted a face-to-face interview with them on the spot would have been imposing upon their limited time at the Penny Arcade Expo (PAX); conversely, a face-to-face interview may either have contributed to social unease or, on the contrary, have enhanced the level of comfort felt by the participant. All of these are variables that have the potential to redirect future courses of study on this topic.

From a true Bourdieu-ian perspective, Penny Arcade is another example of the lure of economic capital and the power that it brings. Penny Arcade has provided a valuable example of the ability of a subculture to experience both restricted and large-scale symbolic capital and simultaneously strengthen their position in both fields as a result. Perhaps future case studies on subcultures that waffle between the grounds of the authentic and the mainstream mundane will consider the importance of subcultural capital and the role it plays in determining a subculture's success in this endeavour.

## References

Game Research. (2002), http://www.game-research.com/statistics.asp.

*Digital Gaming in America 2006*. (2006)). San Francisco: Ziff Davis Game Group.

Penny Arcade Volume 1: Attack of the Bacon Robots. (2006) *Publishers Weekly 253*(6), 50-50.

Letter from American Greeting to Penny Arcade. (April 22, 2003) *http://www.chillingeffects.org/protest/notice.cgi?NoticeID=632*.

Jack Thompson is Blasted by Pro-family Group. (Oct 14, 2005) *gamesindustry.biz*, http://www.gamesindustry.biz/content_page.php?aid=12259.

Adorno, T. (1991) *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*. London: Routledge.

Adorno, T., & Horkheimer, M. (1999) The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception. In S. During (Ed.), *The Cultural Studies Reader*. London: Routledge.

Arnold, M. (2006) *Culture and Anarchy*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Bakardjieva, M. (2003) Virtual Togetherness: an everyday-life perspective. *Media, Culture, and Society 25*, 291-313.

Bennett, A. (2004) Virtual Subculture? Youth, Identity and the Internet. In A. Bennett & K. Kahn-Harris (Eds.), *After Subculture*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Bennett, A., & Kahn-Harris, K. (Eds.). (2004) *After Subculture*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Bourdieu, P. (1977) *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (R. Nice, Trans.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1984) *Distinction*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1985) Social Space and the Genesis of Groups. *Theory and Society 14*, 723-744.

Bourdieu, P. (1986) Social Space and Symbolic Power. 14-25.

Bourdieu, P. (1993) *The Field of Cultural Production*. UK: Polity Press.

Boustany, N. Hollywood Stars Find an Audience For Social Causes. *Washington Post* (2007, Sunday, June 10, 2007 ).

Campbell, C. (2006) Next-Gen's Top 25 People of the Year. *Next Generation*, http://www.next-gen.biz/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=4395&Itemid=4392&limit=4391&limitstart=4391.

Clarke, J., Hall, S., Jefferson, T., & Roberts, B. (1975) Subcultures, Cultures and Class. In S. Hall & T. Jefferson (Eds.), *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-war Britain*. London: Hutchinson & Co. Ltd.

Colbourne, S. No niche too small for Penny Arcade. *Globe and Mail* (Aug 31, 2006).

Drake, S. (2005) Child's Play: The Tai Chi Approach. *The Escapist (online) 3*(28), http://www.escapistmagazine.com/print/28/24.

Feineman, N. (2005) *GeekChic: The Ultimate Guide to Geek Culture*. Corte Madera, CA: Gingko Press.

Gabe. (2003) Child's Play: About. *Child's Play Charity*, http://www.childsplaycharity.org/about.php.

Gabe. (2006) Child's Play: About. http://www.childsplaycharity.org/about.php.

Gabe. (2006) Press. *Child's Play Charity*, http://www.childsplaycharity.org/press.php.

Gabe. (April 14, 2003) Tart As a Double Entendre. *Penny Arcade*, www.penny-arcade.com/2003/2014/2004.

Gabe. (Nov 10, 2006) Child's Play! *Penny Arcade*, http://www.penny-arcade.com/2006/2011/2010#1163186280.

Gabe. (Nov 24, 2003) Child's Play. *Penny Arcade*(http://www.penny-arcade.com/2003/11/24).

Gabe. (Sept 26, 2005) The Story. *Penny Arcade*, www.penny-arcade.com/2005/2009/2026.

Gans, H. (1974) *Popular Culture and High Culture*. USA: Basic Books, Inc.

Gelder, K. (2005) The Field of Subcultural Studies. In K. Gelder (Ed.), *The Subcultures Reader*. London and New York: Routledge.

Gladstone, D. (2006) The CGW Interview: Penny Arcade - More than just comic relief, *CGW* (Vol. May 2006).

Grazian, D. (2003) *Blue Chicago*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Hall, S., & Jefferson, T. (Eds.). (1976) *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*. London: Hutchinson & Co Ltd.

Heath, J., & Potter, A. (2004) *Nation of Rebels: Why Counter Culture Became Consumer Culture*. New York: Harper Collins.

Heath, J., & Potter, A. (2004) The Rebel Sell, *University of Toronto Bookstore's Reading Series*. Innis Town Hall: University of Toronto Press.

Hebdige, D. (1979) *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. Florence, KY: Routledge.

Hebdige, D. (1988) *Hiding in the Light: Images and Things*. London: Routledge.

Hesmondhalgh, D. (1999) Indie: The Institutional Politics and Aesthetics of a Popular Music Genre. *Cultural Studies 13*(1), 34-61.

Hills, M. (2002) *Fan Cultures*. London: Routledge.

Hodkinson, P. (2002) *Goth: Identity, Style and Subculture*. New York: Berg.

Jenkins, H. (1992) *Textual Poachers*. New York and London: Routledge.

Jenkins, H. (2006) *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers*. New York: New York University Press.

Jenks, C. (2005) *Subculture: The Fragmentation of the Social*. London: Sage.

Keightley, K. (2001) Reconsidering Rock. In S. Frith, W. Straw & J. Street (Eds.), *The Cambridge companion to pop and rock*. Cambridge and New York Cambridge University Press.

Khoo, R. (2007) Help a student out on some PA research? (pp. Email).

Kidd, A. (1996) Philanthropy and the Social History Paradigm. *Social History*.

Kidd, A. J. (1996) Philanthropy and the `social history paradigm'. *Social History 21*(2), 180.

Leland, J. (2004) *Hip: The History*. New York: HarperCollins.

Mailer, N. (1959) *Advertisements For Myself*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons.

McGuire, W. (1961) Resistance to persuasion conferred by active and passive prior refutation of the same and alternative counterarguments. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology 63*, 326-332.

Miraglia, E., Law, R., & Collins, P. 1999. http://www.wsu.edu/gened/learn-modules/top_culture/culture-definitions/raymond-williams.html

Muggleton, D. (2000) *Inside Subculture*. New York: Berg.

Muggleton, D., & Weinzierl, R. (Eds.). (2003) *The Post-Subcultures Reader*. New York: Berg.

Muggleton, D., & Weinzierl, R. (2003) What is 'Post-cultural Studies' anyway? In D. Muggleton & R. Weinzierl (Eds.), *The Post-subcultures Reader*. New York: Berg.

Negus, K. (1999) *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures*. London and New York: Routledge.

Newman, J. (2004) *Video Games*. London and New York: Routledge.

Park, R. E. (1955) *Society*. Illinois: The Free Press.

Park, R. E. (2005) The City: Suggestions for the Investigation of Human Behavior in the Urban Environment. In K. Gelder (Ed.), *The Subcultures Reader*. New York: Routledge.

Park, R. E., & Burgess, E. W. (1969) *Introduction to the Science of Sociology*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Peck, J. (2001) Itinerary of a Thought: Stuart Hall, Cultural Studies, and the Unresolved Problem of the Relation of Culture to "Not Culture". *Cultural Critique 48*(Spring), 200-249.

Peterson, K. Online comic builds following with razor-sharp jabs at video-game industry. *The Seattle Times* (2004, August 25); Sect. Online.

PR_Newswire. Giving to Charity This Year Is 'Child's Play' - Successful Video Game Charity Launches 2004 Effort. *Seattle Times* (2004).

Robinson, T. (October 4, 2005 ) Harlan Ellison vs. Penny Arcade *A.V Club (online)*, http://www.avclub.com/content/node/41373.

Sandvoss, C. (2005) *Fans*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Schneiderhan, E. (2006) Jane Addams and Classification Struggles in the Early Field of Charity Organization, *Practicing Pierre Bourdieu: In the Field and Across the Disciplines*. University of Michigan.

Shapely, P. (1998) Charity, status and leadership: charitable image and the Manchester man. *v32*(n1), p157(121).

Skala, M. (2007) Strawberry Shortcake V. Gabe and Tycho. http://ansuz.sooke.bc.ca/lawpoli/cases/2003042301.php.

SmugMug. (April 14th, 2002) Penny Arcade Archive. *http://onethumb.smugmug.com/gallery/4808*.

Stahl, G. (2003) Tastefully Renovating Subcultural Theory: Making Space for a New Model. In D. Muggleton & R. Weinzierl (Eds.), *The Post-Subcultures Reader*. New York: Berg.

Thompson, E. P. (1991) *Customs in Common*. London: The Merlin Press Ltd.

Thornton, S. (1996) *Club Cultures*. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press.

Turner, D. A Comic Strip Takes Video Games seriously (Almost). *New York Times* (2004, Dec 16); Sect. G.

Tycho. (2007) The Dangers of Exposure [Podcast]. Bellevue: Penny Arcade.

Tycho. (April 27, 2003) Read it before they take legal action (newspost). *Penny Arcade*, http://www.penny-arcade.com/2003/2004/2025.

Tycho. (May 26, 2005) He's not pissed at us (newspost). *Penny Arcade*, http://www.penny-arcade.com/2005/2009/2026.

Tycho. (Nov 3, 2006) Child's Play 2006 Ultra Megalaunch (!!!). *Penny Arcade*, http://www.penny-arcade.com/2006/2011/2006.

Tycho. (Oct 17, 2005) You Lose (newspost). *Penny Arcade*, http://www.penny-arcade.com/2005/2010/2017.

Williams, R. (1997) Culture Is Ordinary. In A. Gray & J. McGuigan (Eds.), *Studying Culture*. London: Arnold.

**Appendix A: Interview Guide**

1. So how often do you visit the PA site? What parts of it do you visit? What are the top 3 reasons you go to the site? What's your favourite comic?
2. What did it mean to you to go to PAX? What made you decide to go? What was your favourite part?
3. Do you consider yourself a gamer? What is a gamer (name 3 characteristics of a gamer)? What are social stereotypes about gamers? How are these two definitions different?
4. How did you get into PA? If you were telling a gamer about PA who had never heard of them, what would you tell them to get them hooked? What about if they weren't a gamer? Do you have to be a gamer to "get" PA?
5. Who are PA fans? Would you say PA fans are like a sub-group within the broader gamer subculture? What makes PA fans different from that larger culture? Would you consider yourself part of this sub-group?
6. What games are you playing right now? Five favourite games of all time?
7. How influential is PA in your purchasing decisions (like PS or Wii?)
8. Do you consider PA to be oppositional to the "mainstream" and if so, in what ways? What do you think of PA's run in with Jack Thompson? Harlen Ellison? How is PA giving gamers a voice?
9. What were your thoughts when you first heard about Child's Play?
10. To sum up, what would you say PA's role is in the gaming industry?

**Appendix B: Ethics Consent Form**


Research Project Title:

**How do people who play videogames conceptualize their identity as "gamers?"**

Investigator: Bryanne Miller

This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how gamers conceptualize their identity in the context of wider social stereotypes about gamers. Specifically, I wish to know how gamers think of themselves and the extent that being a gamer plays into one's overall social identity. To this end, I have chosen to interview 6 – 10 gamers recruited from the 2006 Penny Arcade Expo. I have chosen to interview Penny Arcade fans, because Penny

Arcade deals with gamer identity as it counters mainstream misconceptions about gamers.

Your participation will involve a 30-40 minute telephone interview where I will ask you open-ended questions about your involvement with videogames and Penny Arcade, and the how you identify with the label of "being a gamer." This conversation will be audio-recorded. You are under no obligation to complete this interview and can withdraw your consent at any time (including after the interview) up until November 2006, though any data collected up to this time may still be used in the final analysis.

There is no known harm that may result from your participation in this study, and your identity will be protected by a pseudonym of your choosing should you wish to remain anonymous. Alternatively, if you are not interested in conducting a formal interview, we can have an open conversation on this or related topics. All information provided by you will be used and disclosed with your permission. At the completion of my analysis, I may ask that you confirm the accuracy of my interpretation of the interview and its validity within a two-week time period of your having received the data. The interview cassette tapes and transcripts will be stored in a filing cabinet at my home. This information will be stored for two to five years, after which point it will be destroyed. No information that discloses your identity will be released or published without your specific permission for its disclosure. In addition to being part of the final thesis, the results of this research may be published in an academic journal or presented at an academic conference.

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to participate as a subject. It also verifies that you are eighteen years of age or over. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from this study up until November 2006. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation. If you have further questions concerning matters related to this research, please contact:

Bryanne Miller (researcher) (403) 521-0376 or bhmiller@ucalgary.ca

Dr. Bart Beaty (supervisor) (403) 220-7246 or beaty@ucalgary.ca

If you have any questions or issues concerning this project that are not related to the specifics of the research, you may also contact the Research Services Office at (403) 220-3782 and ask for Mrs. Bonnie Scherrer.

Please check one:

- □ I wish to be referred to by the pseudonym _____ (write your chosen name).
- □ I would prefer to use my real name.

I consent to be audio taped:

- □ Yes
- □ No

_____Participant's Name (Please Print)
Telephone Email

Participant's Signature

Date

Investigator and/or Delegate's Signature

Date

Witness' Signature

Date

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this research study.