

“Good game?”: Young People, Geopolitics and Violence(s) in the Ludic Assemblages of Battle Royale Videogames and Streams

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis was composed by myself, the work contained in this thesis is my own aside from where otherwise explicitly stated in the text, and that this work has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification except as specified.

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Covid-19 Impact Form

I would like to state here that the Covid-19 pandemic and corresponding restrictions have significantly affected planned research activities and the content of the thesis, to which I needed to make a number of adjustments, as I will outline below:

The Covid-19 restrictions caused several disruptions to this study. During the initial stages of my PhD, restrictions led to several challenges and inconveniences when doing routine work, like being unable to access library resources physically. However, when it came to starting fieldwork in Spring 2021 as a result of still being under these restrictions I needed to make several adjustments to my planned research activities and foci. Namely, I decided to no longer conduct 'in-person' ethnography of gaming tournaments as these were not permitted in physical venues during this time. Additionally, another gaming café which was a potential field site was also closed down because of the pandemic. This meant I lost several avenues through which to collect data and also recruit potential participants for interviews, in turn meaning I was unable to conduct as many interviews as originally planned. I only started 'in-person' ethnography in a gaming lounge in Autumn 2021 once I again received ethical approval and was fully vaccinated against Covid-19.

The Covid-19 pandemic also caused a number of disruptions to this PhD. During this time, I struggled to retain a good work/life balance, felt isolated from colleagues, and could not fully concentrate on work when working from home because of the uncertainty, and the health risks to my father who is classified as critically extremely vulnerable. This had a negative impact on my mental health, in particular worsening my OCD and health anxiety. Likewise, the risk of being infected by Covid-19 when doing 'in-person' ethnography at the gaming lounge made data collection and the recruitment of participants for interviews from this space difficult since interacting with others made me feel uncomfortable. Furthermore, I curtailed 'in-person' ethnography in December 2021, earlier than planned, due to the rapid rise in cases from the Omicron variant and the increased risk of infecting my father who was hospitalised around that time. As a result, I tried to collect more data through interviews, where difficulties in recruitment led to me extending the period of fieldwork as I looked for participants without

much success, delaying progress and causing further stress. Although the pandemic and restrictions have since eased in the UK, the harm to my mental health, has subsequently made it difficult to later negotiate periods of bereavement and again my father's health issues, even after continuing therapy and a month-long suspension of studies, thus reducing my capacity to work.

While I have received several funding and time extensions as a result of these issues, and also made adjustments where necessary, ultimately the Covid-19 pandemic and resulting restrictions have caused a number of personal and practical issues that while difficult to quantify, have impacted this research project and the content of this thesis.

Abstract

This thesis focuses on the young people who play, view and live-stream *Call of Duty: Warzone* and other Battle Royale videogames, to understand how geopolitics emerges through what I term ludic assemblages, and also to explore the affects/effects of this on young people. Building on emerging scholarship within the sub-discipline of popular geopolitics, this thesis will argue that processes of globalisation, have further entangled the young people who play, view and live-stream Battle Royale videogames and Twitch broadcasts in multitudinous processes of what Hardt and Negri (2000, 2004) term “Empire” (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009). Specifically, in critically examining the (geopolitical) agencies, ambiguities and subjectivities of young gamers, this thesis attends to the ways in which they are involved in the co-constitution of ludic assemblages, through ‘everyday’, ‘violent’ and playful practices of videogaming and Twitch streaming. Furthermore, this thesis explores how young people as complex subjects negotiate the social effects/affects of these processes of militainment and ludocapitalism in their everyday lives, mapping the multiplicity of violence(s) enacted on and by young gamers (with)in these ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and streams.

In attending to the ludic in formation, I undertook an innovative, qualitative, mixed methods approach going under the label of assemblage ethnography (Ghoddousi and Page 2020), using participant observation (in digital and physical spaces), semi-structured interviews and auto-ethnography to investigate how the young people who play, spectate and live-stream Battle Royale videogames and Twitch streams, co-constitute and *live* geopolitics (Dittmer and Gray 2010). By moving away from the abstract, ‘textual’ focus of prior scholarship on how popular geopolitical discourse shapes the everyday, to instead engage with the ways in which young people are themselves co-constitutive of geopolitics, this thesis unpacks ambiguous notions of, and the relations between, play, geopolitics and violence.

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Last but not certainly least, I want to thank my family for their continued love and support. Mam and Dad, words cannot describe how much you have done for me since day dot but I promise I appreciate the both of you immensely. And to my Grandad Tom and Nanna Rose, for whom this is dedicated to, I'm sad you never got to see me finish this, but I hope I made you proud.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

“Video games are a paradigmatic media of Empire— planetary, militarized hypercapitalism— and of some of the forces presently challenging it”

(Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009: xv- italics in original)

1.1 Good Game? Videogames, Empire and Assemblage



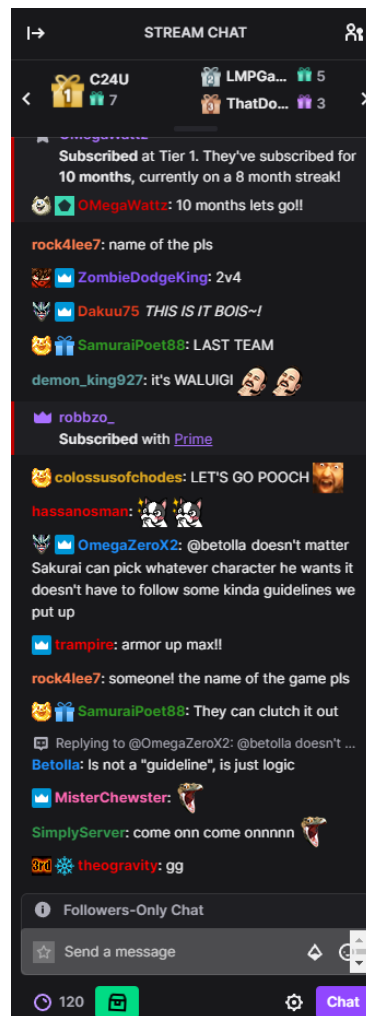


Figure 1: Images from a Twitch stream/channel where the streamer is interacting with viewers after winning a game of *Call of Duty: Warzone*.

Above in *Figure 1*, is a snapshot of various practices, actants and affects involved in a Twitch stream of *Call of Duty: Warzone*, a popular Battle Royale videogame and prominent artefact of popular culture that has become socially and culturally embedded in everyday life. Here taking place in a range of spaces ranging from the bedroom to the gaming lounge, a large number of players from across the world fight to be the last one(s) standing in these violent, digital worlds. Yet, first-person shooter video games like those from the *Call of Duty* series have also been the target of moral panics within the media due to their violent content (Leonard 2009; Shaw and Warf 2009) as have young men, the most common demographic for playing this genre of games (see Cohen 2002). Moreover, such games are linked to the emergence of a hyper-masculine techno-culture, in which misogyny, homophobia and racism is rife and far-right politics is espoused in spaces of digital culture (see Taylor and Voorhees 2018). Similarly, such games have been discussed for their addictive qualities, with gaming disorder/addiction

having recently been officially recognised by the World Health Organisation (Wakefield 2018), and with a rise in referrals to the National Centre for Gaming Disorders in the UK during the pandemic (Criddle 2021). Conversely, these videogames have also been highlighted for their positive qualities with research finding that playing videogames actually has a beneficial impact on people's mental health (Hern 2020). This then speaks to the ambiguous nature of these games and the complex relations between violence and play that I look to unpack throughout this thesis.

Nonetheless, it is also imperative to consider the geopolitical dimensions of these videogames, especially since as highlighted in the quote above, videogames have been seen as an instrument of "Empire" (Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter 2009). As Hardt and Negri (2000, 2004) elucidate, "Empire" is a post-modern "globalised biopolitical machine" where a perpetual, unending and vital system of networked power emerges under the governance of global capitalism and through which war itself becomes a constant social condition entrenched into the culture of everyday life. Pertinently, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009) discuss how videogames represent the apparatuses of the military and the market either as forms of militainment such as the military-themed first-person shooter *America's Army*, or ludocapitalism like the simulation game *Second Life*, which work to reproduce subjectivities of the 'worker-consumer' and the 'soldier-citizen' that are central to "Empire". Equally it is also important to recognise the multitudinous potential of these videogames, and how they are instrumental as in not just animating but also destabilising "Empire". Here the multitude as described by Hardt and Negri (2000, 2004) is a social force that acts as the motor and antagonist for "Empire" that can subsequently be defined in three different but connected ways. These being that; one, it enables new forms of subjectivity to facilitate global capital; two, new social movements opposing global capitalism; and three its capacity as political project to develop, protect and propose alternatives to "Empire". While for videogames and contemporary video game culture, the multitudinous potential can be seized on for practices of counter-play, i.e. acts of contestation within and against the ideologies of individual games of "Empire". Nevertheless, as Boluk and LeMieux (2017: 4) state, it is important to recognise the various practices and material discontinuities that emerge through videogaming. Here they draw attention to how through a diverse range of practices, such as playing, competing, streaming, spectating and cheating, videogames as a mass medium and cultural commodity

become transformed into instruments, equipment, tools and toys through which to directly or indirectly intervene in the affective and political economies of the same technologies responsible for the privatisation of play. Thus, this research considers how an array of prosaic practices by young gamers, like those noted above, as enabled through the multitude can work to constitute and/or unsettle “Empire”.

My research builds on Hardt and Negri’s (2000, 2004) notions of “Empire” and the multitude, through an engagement with popular geopolitical scholarship and related bodies of work done around geopolitics, (videogame) play and violence. In developing and exploring the ludic assemblage, I attend to the multiple violence(s) that emerge through Battle Royale videogames and live-streams in everyday life, critically analysing the ways in which these media work as forms of both militainment and ludocapitalism in co-constituting “Empire”, and how young gamers support, contest and negotiate these geopolitical processes. Specifically, I argue that critical geopolitical and geographical research so far has largely focused on videogames due to their representations of military violence, and so ignores the multiplicity of violences that emerge through their play in young people’s everyday lives. As such, through a focus on the everyday, and young people, this research looks to avoid perpetuating the masculinist, disembodied and distanced gaze of both classical, and also some critical geopolitical scholarship (Hyndman 2001; Massaro and Williams 2013). In particular, it seeks to overcome how in the sub-field of popular geopolitics “a residual masculinism seems to persist” (Glynn and Cupples 2015: 273) in terms of how popular cultural forms are seen as static ‘texts’ that either reproduce or subvert dominant geopolitical discourses, thus meaning their ambiguities, complexities and contradictions are overlooked. Indeed, I maintain that it is only through empirical, ‘grounded’ investigations into their complex, ambiguous nature in young people’s everyday lives that we can gain a greater understanding of the ways in which Battle Royale videogames and streams co-constitute an everyday geopolitics – as I do here in engaging with the prosaic but vitalist practices of streaming, spectating and cheating that have previously not been given much (if any) attention within geographical scholarship.

Subsequently, this research turns to and builds on notions of assemblage, in emphasising the complex, contingent set of relations between the multiple, heterogeneous actants that are

made through practices of playing, streaming and watching Battle Royale videogames like *Call of Duty: Warzone*. Tracing the development of its usage in popular/everyday geopolitics and in particular how it has been conceived of and utilised by Dittmer (2013a, 2013b, 2015a, 2015b, 2017) as scholars move beyond discourse to focus on relationality and materiality, I build on such work to analyse the social-material-assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and live-streams (expanded further in Chapter 4). Pertinently, I conceive of the ludic assemblage as a way of attending to the ludic in formation (c.f. Anderson and McFarlane 2011; Anderson et al. 2012a), where through playfully engaging with Battle Royale videogames and streams and the young people who play, watch and broadcast them, I shed light on the relations between geopolitics, violence and play. Through the use of ethnographic methods to explore the emergence of these ludic assemblages in array of spaces and places traversed by young gamers in their everyday lives, I consider the multitudinous potential of these ludic assemblages and the ways in which they are mutually shaped through processes of “Empire”. Through doing so, I seek to gain a better understanding of some of the ways in which young people encounter, negotiate and engage with ‘the geopolitical’ in forms of popular culture that are embedded their everyday lives.

1.2 Research Questions and Aims

In order to explore the themes and ideas mentioned earlier in this chapter, my research was centred on answering two key questions:

1. In what ways are young people who play, watch and broadcast *Call of Duty: Warzone* and other Battle Royale games and streams co-constitutive of ‘everyday’ geopolitics?
2. How do young people’s engagements with the ludic assemblages of *Call of Duty: Warzone* and other Battle Royale games and streams, shape their everyday lives?

Through these research questions, I sought to investigate the ambiguous nature of Battle Royale videogames and streams within the context of the everyday lives of young gamers. More precisely here, the focus was on notions of violence, geopolitics and play, and the relations between these three emergent, complex phenomena through Hardt and Negri’s concept of “Empire”. Significantly, I further conceptualise “Empire” itself as an assemblage co-constituted through a multiplicity of other assemblages that emerge in everyday life, including

those of Battle Royale videogames and streams, to critically examine the power of the multitude and its geopolitical, ludic and violent dimensions. In looking to answer these two research questions, I was further guided by three research aims:

- I. Attend to how young people engage with geopolitics in the co-constitution of the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and streams
- II. Engage with young people to identify what are the social effects of being involved in these ludic assemblages, and explore how they negotiate these processes in their everyday lives.
- III. Develop and evaluate a methodological approach towards doing ludic assemblage that is open to the ambiguity of play and enables playful engagements with the potentialities of the liminal, experimental space-times of Battle Royale videogames and streams.

The first two of these aims are empirical-based goals for this research, through which I use the data collected from an extensive period of fieldwork to analyse these ludic assemblages. This research seeks to add to work on the critical geopolitics of children and young people in attending to their engagements with popular culture. However, to avoid over-stressing or romanticising the agency of young gamers in their play, I recognise them as one group of actants among many others in these ludic assemblages to offer a critical, nuanced analysis of the ways in which they affect and are affected by geopolitics in their everyday lives. Moreover, in examining the various, mutual relations that form between young gamers and non-human actants in these ludic assemblages as agency becomes distributed in ludic assemblage, two further lines of enquiry arise. One, such an approach enables me to map the complex geographies of these ludic assemblages in analysing how they intersect through a variety of scales (from the body to the global). And two, it illuminates the immanent power of these assemblages, in terms of both their affects on young gamers' (bodies) and their broader social effects in everyday life, thus offering a deeper understanding of the ambiguous nature of, and relations between, play, violence and geopolitics. Altogether, this then necessitates the need for a third aim, which becomes a methodological objective for this research. Indeed, through employing the approach of assemblage ethnography (Ghoddousi and Page 2020) to research the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and streams, I more broadly consider its methodological value in critical geopolitical/geographical scholarship for intervening in the

various socio-material-affective assemblages that emerge in everyday life (which will be further expanded on in Chapter 3, and evaluated in the concluding Chapter 10).

1.3 Research Context

Having been a gamer since childhood I had always been interested in videogames, so inspired by the likes of Bos (2018a), as an academic I have enthusiastically sought to engage with the geopolitics of military-themed videogames, in wanting to contribute to a budding, interdisciplinary body of scholarship attending to the medium (I consider my positionality further in Chapter 4). Yet, despite this growing academic attention in videogames, I argue that there still remains significant gaps in the literature on Battle Royale videogames or indeed multiplayer modes of first-person shooters, as well as the live-streaming of videogames on websites such as Twitch and YouTube. More broadly for geography, this speaks to the lack of scholarly engagement into certain ‘vulgar’ or ‘mainstream’ elements of popular culture, including many well-known cultural figures, icons and artefacts - be it Abba, *Peppa Pig* or *Fortnite* (Horton 2019; Kinsley 2016; Woodyer 2018). However, it especially illustrates the lack of geographical research done on videogames in the context of the everyday, despite how the medium has become increasingly socially embedded in the everyday lives of people from childhood and across the life course (Gosling and Crawford 2011) as well as how it forms part a wider assemblage of popular culture (Dittmer 2015a). This is especially important when considering how scholarship has largely been critical towards the purported effects of military-themed games on the militarisation of society, with a particular focus on *America’s Army* as an exemplar for the relationship between the gaming industry and the military (der Derian 2009; Power 2007; Salter 2011; Stahl 2006, 2010). Yet, despite such critiques, there still remains a lack of attention paid to commercial military-themed videogames and very few empirical investigations on their play in the social, material and geographical contexts of everyday life.

As such, this research looks to contribute to these bodies of literature by paying attention to both Battle Royale videogames and Twitch streams. The increasingly popular Battle Royale genre of videogames including the likes of *Fortnite*, *Apex: Legends* and *Call of Duty: Warzone* is in fact a composite of genres. Specifically, it combines last-man standing gameplay with the survival, exploration and scavenging elements of a survival game, as players, either individually

or in small teams of up to four players, compete against others within a gradually shrinking "safe area". Although first popularised by the game *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds*, this genre of videogames emerged from fans of other games such as *Minecraft* and *ARMA 2*, who were making modifications to these games. However, the fictional narrative "Battle Royale" genre exists in other forms of media, such as films, books and TV shows, perhaps most notably the *Hunger Games* series and more recently the South Korean drama *Squid Game* - which pertinently itself has been remediated into a British reality competition TV show *Squid Game: The Challenge*. Moreover, the genre is heavily based on the narrative of the controversial, 2000 Japanese action-thriller film *Battle Royale*, (which is itself an adaption of the eponymous 1999 novel). In the book/film, Japan is ran by a fictional totalitarian government which sends a group of junior high-school students to a remote island where they must scavenge for food and weapons and fight each other until there is a single survivor. Significantly then, the genre illustrates Dittmer's (2015a) notion that popular culture is a 'doing', an assemblage emerging through lively interactions between diverse actors and one that is productive and iterative of new media- an idea discussed in more detail in Chapter 3. Additionally, it should be recognised how the Battle Royale genre evolves from, encompasses and amalgamates other forms of militainment culture such as military-themed shooters in the case of *Call of Duty: Warzone* and reality TV shows in the case of *Squid Game: The Challenge* (see Stahl 2010). This is despite how different Battle Royale media like *The Hunger Games* (see Kirby 2016) have presented social critiques of Western capitalism and American imperialism. This then speaks to the need for research to engage with how the genre through its multitudinous potential simultaneously works as the motor for and antagonist of "Empire".

While more specifically, several of these Battle Royale videogames reproduce and rework masculinist, militaristic and violent geopolitical discourses found in military-themed first-person shooters (e.g. Salter 2011). Yet, as each match is also shaped by player-based interactions, as these videogames are open-ended, volatile and complex in nature. Or in the language of assemblage, these ludic assemblages carry with them a sense of puissance or immanence, with multiple 'lines of flight' and an excess of affects. This is especially important when, as discussed in Chapter 2, considering the transformative potential of play, and the ways in which it can reinforce hegemonic geopolitical imaginings or produce alternative forms of geopolitics. Finally, it should be recognised that Battle Royale videogames games like *Fortnite*

act as a platform or for various cultural commodities (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2021). This is why here in this thesis, I will explore the social, economic and cultural dimensions of these games beyond just their geopolitical relations, and as part of a wider assemblage of popular culture, to better encapsulate the ways in which these Battle Royale videogames have become embedded in everyday life and work as forms of both militainment and ludocapitalism in animating (and) subverting “Empire”.

The rise in popularity of Battle Royale videogames also coincides with the rise of live-streaming on websites such as YouTube and Twitch, and the continuing growth of ‘esports’, in which players participate in organised, multi-player competitions on video games to spectators worldwide. Twitch.tv - the focus of this research - is the most popular website for live-streaming videogames with over 30 million daily active users including over 2 million streamers in 2023 (Elad 2023), with *Fortnite*, *Apex: Legends* and *Call of Duty: Warzone* consistently within the top 20 most popular games on the site respectively (TwitchTracker 2024). Yet, is important to recognise how streaming is an extension of “Empire”, where processes of platformisation have led to a reconfiguration of playbour, as Twitch streamers conduct precarious, strenuous and insecure digital labour to extract income as they transform play into work (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2021). This research builds on this scholarship by looking at how the streaming of Battle Royale videogames like *Call of Duty: Warzone* is not just a development in processes of ludocapitalism, but also work as a new form of militainment. Furthermore, it explores the ambiguous relations between play, geopolitics and violence within these ludic assemblages as part of a hyper-masculine gaming techno-culture for a nuanced view of how young gamers can both support and contest hegemonic geopolitical discourse through various practices. In short then, I contend that this makes Battle Royale videogames and streams curious and complex ludic assemblages to study, and this why the medium should become more of a focus for geographers and other social scientists interested in geopolitics, violence and play and the relations between these phenomena.

1.4 Summary of Chapters

The following three chapters will expand on the literature that has been briefly outlined above in discussing the theoretical and methodological approach taken in this research. Chapter 2

will review the literature on (game)play, war and violence in geography and related disciplines, before linking this scholarship together with Hardt and Negri's (2000, 2004) "'Empire'". To begin with, this chapter will explore how work within (political) geography has attended to issues of war and violence, tracing the development of geopolitics as a discipline from one that supported imperialist and colonialist policies towards one which critiqued geopolitical discourse. I will also outline the different ways in which various thinkers from feminist geopolitical scholarship and critical military studies, as well as the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu have engaged with notions of violence and war. Secondly, this chapter will outline how the sub-discipline of popular geopolitics has attended to the relationship between geopolitics and popular culture, and how following critiques of the wider discipline there has since been a larger emphasis on the ways in which people live geopolitics. Thirdly, this chapter through Woodyer (2012) discusses the geographies of play, before specifically turning to work in ludic geopolitics on 'war toys'. Fourthly, this chapter shows how scholars within game studies, cultural geography, and related scholarship have variously defined videogames, and how this work has developed in attending to videogaming as an both an event and a practice. Fifthly, this chapter outlines the debate on the degree to which military-themed videogames support the militarisation of everyday life, making the argument that greater attention needs to be paid to the playing of war in the context of (young) people's everyday lives. Sixthly, this chapter in elucidating on Hardt and Negri's (2000, 2004) notions of "Empire" and the multitude, further discusses the work of Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter's (2009) in exploring how videogames act as either forms of ludocapitalism or militainment. I develop this work further in proposing that Battle Royales games and live-streams act as forms of both ludocapitalism and militainment in thinking about how they work to power and subvert "Empire". In bringing these bodies of literature together, and to extend popular geopolitical scholarship specifically, I seek to illuminate how violence, geopolitics, war and play are intertwined in young people's everyday lives through these processes of the multitude and "Empire".

Chapter 3 discusses how scholars have used assemblage and ethnography, both together and separately in their research as theoretical, conceptual and methodological approaches, before setting out how assemblage ethnography (Ghoddousi and Page 2020) can be used to explore how geopolitics and violence(s) manifest in the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames

and live-streams. Firstly, this chapter outlines how geographers and other social scientists have thought about assemblage, with a specific focus on the work of Deleuze and Guattari. The next section focuses on the growing scholarship on assemblage, and the 'more-than representational' or 'more-than human' within political geography and critical geopolitics following the material and relational turns that have occurred within the social sciences and humanities. The chapter then turns to outlining how Dittmer has used the work of Deleuze and Guattari, DeLanda's assemblage theory, complexity theory and Protevi's (2009) bodies politic, in developing a geopolitical approach towards assemblage. Following this, in discussing ethical and political issues towards assemblage-as-ethos, this chapter turns to Page and Ghouddousi's (2020) approach of assemblage ethnography as a way of analysing, but also intervening in the emergent politics of socio-material-affective assemblages. In looking at the ways in which ethnographic methods have been used to study play and humour, this chapter returns to Dittmer's work on assemblage, and in particular his ethnographic studies of geopolitics and humour in the simulation games *Model United Nations* and *Statecraft*, as well as ethnographic work done in ludic geopolitics on 'war toys'. Finally, this chapter focus on how game studies has used assemblage to explore practices of videogaming, before specifically turning to how the ethnographic work of Payne (2010) and Bos (2018a) attends to the ways in which (military-themed) videogaming actually 'plays out' in everyday life. Ultimately, through framing "Empire" as an assemblage in and of itself that co-constitutes the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and live-streams, this chapter looks to show how assemblage ethnography can be used more broadly to analyse how the multitude both animates and subverts "Empire".

Chapter 4 focuses on the use of various methods in examining how young people are co-constitutive of the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and live-streams, and the effects this has on their everyday lives. The first section of this chapter will discuss how work in geography and social sciences has attended to youth and young people. It will outline how this body of work has recognised them as active social and political actors, in which a variety of qualitative methods have been used to examine their everyday experiences. Additionally, this chapter will highlight recent scholarship problematising notions of agency in relation to the 'more-than-human' and the increasingly blurry categorisations of childhood and youth. The chapter then focuses on the qualitative methods used in exploring gamers' interactions

across both digital and physical gaming spaces in the context of developments in digital culture. In bringing together, the similar methodologies associated with the geographies of children, youth and family and gamers/audiences, this chapter will frame how research on young gamers can be done through assemblage ethnography (Ghoddousi and Page 2020). Following this, there is then a discussion of how assemblage ethnography as an approach enabled me to conduct ‘fieldwork’ during the Covid-19 pandemic. The subsequent sections will then cover the exact methods undertaken during fieldwork in turn, those being videogame stream ethnography, participant observation, semi-structured interviews and auto-ethnographic methods. In doing so, I will show how these methods together enable greater insights into the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and streams that emerge in young people’s everyday lives.

The following five chapters are empirically based, data analysis chapters, but can be further divided into two categories based on their scope and thematic content. Chapters 5 and 6 explore the spaces, places and bodies, and relations between these, which make up the emergent ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and streams. In doing so, these chapters more broadly offer context for arguments made in Chapters 7, 8 and 9, in which I unpack ambiguous notions of geopolitics, violence and play and disentangle the relations between these phenomena that emerge in ludic assemblage and in turn co-constitute “Empire”.

Chapter 5 focuses on the geographical dimensions of these ludic assemblages. To begin with, this chapter briefly overviews the spaces and places of media involved in ludic war, before specifically engaging with the space of the home and its geopolitical dimensions, in particular illuminating how it has become space of media consumption and production. Secondly, this chapter looks at the socio-cultural space of the gaming lounge as a site for young people and others’ leisure, before then specifically focusing on its geopolitical dimensions as a space of surveillance. Next, this chapter explores the Twitch stream within the emergent ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames, thinking about it as both a social space and a digital interface that facilitates streamer’s playbour. Lastly, this chapter considers the wider geographies, materialities and agencies of the Internet, in terms of how it enables and/or

disables the emergence of these ludic assemblages. In tracing the multiple physical and digital spaces involved in ludic war, as well as trans-scalar relations that form between these sites, in ludic assemblage, this chapter will illustrate the geographical extent of the globalised biopolitical regime of “Empire”.

Chapter 6 attends to the young gamers themselves and focuses on the complex and multiple ways through which young gamers co-constitute, engage with and negotiate geopolitics in the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and their everyday lives. Examining how videogames and the gaming scene has continued to be a part of their life course, this chapter will discuss how videogaming has become socially and culturally embedded in everyday life. Here there will also be a focus on the body, in discussing the immersive qualities of videogames how the medium is part of an attention economy, and how young people’s continued interactions with videogames and the wider gaming scene shapes their (political) subjectivities, engagements and identities. Following this, the discussion will move to the embodied practices of streamers as they transform their own play into work, as well as how together in these stream assemblages through ludic collaboration, viewers support each other in looking to negotiate the bodily affects and tensions that arise when conducting ludic war in Battle Royale videogames. In doing so, this chapter will illustrate how doing assemblage ethnography enables us to foreground young people’s voices, without over-emphasising nor celebrating their agency within these ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and streams.

Chapter 7 discusses the humorous and toxic dimensions of the ludic assemblages that emerge through the gaming and streaming of Battle Royales. Specifically, this chapter attends to the Twitch streams of Battle Royale videogames and explores how these emergent, ludic assemblages are instructive of a hyper-masculine, militarised gaming technoculture, which is in turn co-constitutive of “Empire”. After first outlining the geographical scholarship on humour and laughter, this chapter through a number of examples, charts various expressions of an idiosyncratic ‘stream-humour’ (Johnson 2022) and its importance to the affective labour of streamers. After then considering how gameplay is regulated through discourses of domination, this chapter will then turn to how the same assemblages are productive of, and

transformed by affects of toxicity, in contrast to more positive forms of playfulness. In particular, it will emphasise the ways in which affects of toxicity and humour resonate, counteract and intertwine with each other throughout the event of the stream, illustrating how both affects enable the emergence of these homosocial, militaristic assemblages. Building on this, the focus will then be on the various ways in which young gamers and streamers alike have (or have not) been affected by and negotiated discrimination and affects of toxicity when gaming. Ultimately, in engaging with these ludic assemblages this chapter will shed light on the complex, ambiguous relations between play and geopolitics that emerge in everyday life through “Empire”.

Chapter 8 explores how young gamers think about, engage with and participate in politics in their everyday lives, including in relation to videogaming. Firstly, this chapter will overview how young people have been understood as (geo)political agents within critical geopolitics and political geographical scholarship, arguing for a need to further consider how their agencies, subjectivities and dispositions are in part shaped through their interactions with videogames and a wider assemblage of popular culture. Secondly, I extend on the empirical work of scholars focusing on audiences’ interpretations’ of military-themed videogames (e.g. Huntemann 2010, Payne 2010; Robinson 2013). Here in attending to how young gamers engage with the hegemonic geopolitical imaginaries and military representations in Battle Royale videogames like *Call of Duty: Warzone* (e.g. Bos 2018a; Power 2007; Smicker 2010) I consider how their views are in fact shaped by a range of factors. Thirdly, I investigate the degree to which young people participate in ‘big P’ and ‘small p’ politics in their everyday lives, and how this has been affected by their interactions with popular culture and social media. Fourthly, I examine how young people engage with ‘small p’ politics through practices of videogaming, in relation to how this increasingly progressive gaming industry and a growing, diverse player base has been opposed by reactionary, misogynistic and racist elements of gaming culture (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2021). Lastly, this chapter returns to ideas presented in the previous chapter about how the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and Twitch streams are indicative of a hyper-masculine gaming technoculture coded by discourses of domination and thus work as forms of ludocapitalism and militainment, in addition to the political dimensions of Twitch as a form of social media. Specifically, this section focuses on how these streams are constructed by streamers as ‘apolitical’ spaces

separated from everyday life despite the various entanglements with processes of geopolitics, militarisation and neo-liberalism that characterise “Empire”. As such, this chapter will further elucidate how young gamers as first-bodies politic or assemblages in and of themselves, are caught up in flows of media and popular culture, which in turn affects the ways in which they think about, engage with and participate in P/politics.

Chapter 9 focuses on how young gamers have encountered and negotiated the violent and addictive qualities of videogames through the immersive practice of videogaming. After first charting literature done on young people’s play, risk and violence, this chapter will subsequently attend to the moral panic of violence in these games, and look at how interviewees instead were more concerned with the addictive aspects of these games. In doing so I will further emphasise the ambiguity of play, in terms of how young players have formed complex entanglements with videogames across their life course, with a specific focus on their addictive and/or therapeutic qualities in tandem with the further monetisation of videogames through micro-transactions. Finally, this chapter will again turn to the economic and social dimensions of (Twitch) streaming in attending to the increasingly blurry lines between gaming and gambling, as streamers look to monetise their immaterial playbour. In doing so, I will offer a greater understanding of (Battle Royale) videogames and Twitch streams are productive of a multiplicity of violences inherent to Hardt and Negri’s (2000, 2004) “Empire”, beyond just digitally-mediated representations of military violence.

Chapter 10 presents the conclusion to the thesis, summarising these chapters, before restating my key research findings according to the central research questions and research aims that I have just laid out. In doing so, I will then make clear my contributions to knowledge, focusing on the themes and concepts, both empirical and theoretical, with which my research engages. Here I position my conclusions within wider debates on violence, assemblage and play in critical geopolitics and related bodies of scholarship, engaging again with these notions of “Empire” and the multitude. Additionally, I critically appraise assemblage ethnography as a methodological approach towards investigating and potentially intervening in processes of “Empire” and the multitude. I then finish by offering directions for future research that could offer deeper understandings of a number of themes raised throughout the thesis.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter will review the literature done on (game)play, war and violence in geography and related disciplines, before linking this scholarship together with Hardt and Negri's "Empire" (2000, 2004). The first section of this chapter will explore how work within (political) geography has attended to issues of war and violence, tracing the development of geopolitics as a discipline from one that supported imperialist and colonialist policies towards one that critiqued geopolitical discourse. Following this, it will outline the different ways in which feminist geopolitical scholarship, critical military studies and Bourdieu have engaged with notions of violence and war. Secondly, this chapter will outline how the sub-discipline of popular geopolitics has engaged with the relationship between geopolitics and popular culture, and how as a response to critiques of the wider discipline there has been a greater focus on the ways in which people live geopolitics. Thirdly, this chapter through Woodyer (2012) discusses the geographies of play, with a particular engagement with research in the small but growing sub-field of ludic geopolitics and its work on children's play of 'war toys'. Fourthly, this chapter charts the various definitions of videogames within game studies, cultural geography, and related literature, before discussing how scholars here have come to understand videogaming as both an event and a practice. The penultimate section outlines the debate on the extent to which military-themed videogames support the militarisation of everyday life, while calling for more attention to be paid to the everyday contexts of ludic war. Finally, this chapter further discusses the work of Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter (2009; 2021) in exploring how videogames act as either forms of ludocapitalism or militainment and are thus paradigmatic of "Empire" and the multitude. Specifically, both this thesis and Witheford and De Peuter engage with Hardt and Negri's (2000, 2004) theorisations of "Empire" – the global biopolitical regime operating through political, economic, and cultural forces central to capitalism - and "the multitude" - the social force that acts as both the motor and antagonist to "Empire", working within and against it. Subsequently, I develop Witheford and De Peuter's work further in proposing that Battle Royales games and live-streams act as both forms of ludocapitalism and militainment. In bringing these bodies of literature together, and to extend popular geopolitical scholarship in particular, through the lens of "Empire" and the multitude, I seek to shed light on how violence, geopolitics and play as complex phenomena are entangled in and shape young people's everyday lives.

2.1 Geopolitics, War and Violence

The discipline of geography, throughout its history has been closely associated with war, imperialism and (political) violence (e.g. Dittmer and Bos 2019; Gregory and Pred 2007; Ó Tuathail 1996; Pickering 2017; Woodward 2004). These associations can first be seen in the development of the art of cartography as trading, colonial and imperial powers sought to explore and map previously uncharted areas, thereby enabling states to exercise power over these territories and the peoples that inhabited them. In the 19th century, 'Geography' was institutionalised and fashioned as a 'scientific' discipline in European universities, as geographers engaged in the mapping of global space and delimiting of sovereign territory. The term 'geopolitics' - and the body of work now labelled as classical geopolitics - surfaced around this time as imperial powers sought to legitimise these colonial practices as they acquired the last-remaining areas of unclaimed global space. European intellectuals including the likes of Halford MacKinder, Friedrich Ratzel and Karl Haushofer, envisaged 'geopolitics' as an objective, natural science that explained the relationship between politics and territory in determining the growth and decline of nation-states. For instance, much of geopolitical thinking at the time heavily drew on social Darwinian theories, imagining states as organisms that needed to grow to thrive, in addition to theories of environmental determinism, where the development of human societies and their cultures is thought to be determined by the environment. In doing so, these intellectuals produced ethnocentric and reductionist geographical approaches to the study of history and international politics, thus facilitating imperialistic, expansionist state policies. Furthermore, a related sub-discipline categorising itself as military geography, emerged during this time. It attended to the ways in which the terrain and the environment shaped military activities, as scholars sought to use geographical knowledge, tools, and techniques to find solutions to military problems (Woodward 2004). However, following the Second World War, the associations made between Nazi ideology and the work of the German geopolitician Haushofer on Geopolitik resulted in a disavowal of the term geopolitics and the near enough dissolution of political geography (Dittmer and Bos 2019).

The term geopolitics later re-emerged during the Cold War period. Yet, while a few scholars working in spatial science continued to engage with geopolitics in a more traditional sense,

other geographers began to problematise the term and question the geographic assumptions of global politics. A key critique here comes from the radical French geographer Yves Lacoste (1976) who famously wrote *“The Purpose of Geography Is, above All, The Making of War”* (Dittmer and Bos 2019; Pickering 2017). Lacoste claimed that geography exists a) as an instrument of power for states to control and organise territory and its peoples, and b) to obscure the strategic importance of reasoning about space. Lacoste’s writings set a precedent for work later conducted by Anglo-American geographers in the early 1990s. However the inspiration for the body of literature now labelled as critical geopolitics, came not from within geography, but rather critical international relations (IR) scholars like Michael Shapiro and James Der Derian, and ‘post-structural’ and post-colonial theory from Jacques Derrida, Edward Said and Michel Foucault (Dittmer 2018; Dittmer and Bos 2019; Power and Campbell 2010). Post-structuralism is a body of thought that takes meaning as not pre-given and advocated the importance of language and culture in understanding social outcomes. Influenced by such work, political geographers like Gerard O’Tuathail, John Agnew and Simon Dalby took ownership of geopolitics and sought to refashion it into a critical project. Rather than producing theories about how politics and space intersect - as typical of classical geopolitical scholarship - the discipline of critical geopolitics, through its anti-imperial ethos and a poststructuralist concern for representation, dedicated itself to interrogating the geographical assumptions and narratives of geopolitics (Dittmer and Bos 2019; Hyndman 2001).

2.1.1 Critical Geopolitics and Discourse

Foucault’s writings on the relationship between power and knowledge were integral to the then nascent discipline, with the concept of discourse, i.e. the way in which we talk about a subject that frames discussion, appearing in most (if not all) critical geopolitical analyses. In fact, O’Tuathail and Agnew (1992: 192) reasoned that geopolitics itself is a discourse, reconceptualising it as:

“a discursive practice by which intellectuals of statecraft ‘spatialize’ international politics in such a way as to represent it as a ‘world’ characterized by particular types of places, peoples and dramas.”

As Power and Campbell (2010) write in a critical overview of the discipline, it is through these intersections and this reconceptualization of discourse that the diverse body of work we now

call critical geopolitics began to challenge the various writings and readings of global political space and the practices that constitute it. Much of this work is labelled under the schema set out by O'Tuathail and Agnew (1992) which divides geopolitics into three strands. The first thread is that of formal geopolitics which connotes the geopolitical discourses and theories produced within academia, 'think tanks' and strategic institutes. The second is practical geopolitics, appertaining to geopolitics involved in policymaking and the discourses produced by people involved in foreign policy, bureaucracy, the military and other political institutions. The third aspect is popular geopolitics, which refers to geopolitical discourses produced within the media and popular cultural artefacts, such as cinema, novels and cartoons. This research situates itself within this third strand of scholarship, although it should be emphasised that the boundaries between all three of the aforementioned aspects have become increasingly porous (Grayson 2018; Pickering 2017).

Nonetheless, while the concept of discourse has been central to the discipline, there has also been growing dissatisfaction within geography over the ambiguity and thinness of the term (Müller 2008). In particular, several academics chided critical geopolitics for its excessive focus on the deconstruction of elite-produced texts (e.g. Hyndman 2001; Massaro and Williams 2013; Megoran 2006; Müller 2008; Thrift 2000). One notorious, frequently cited critique comes from Nigel Thrift - a key figure in non-representational theory. Thrift (2000) argues that it ignores 'the small things' - referring to the objects, bodies and material practices that make up geopolitics - and calls for critical geographical scholarship to be more attuned to the everyday practices that constitute geography. Müller (2008) follows on from Thrift's critique by offering a broader conceptualisation of discourse, shifting from a textually oriented, agency concept of discourse as narrative, to instead think of discourse as a language and social practice. In a similar vein, Megoran (2006) comments that this heavy emphasis on discourse erases 'ordinary' people's experiences and understandings of geopolitics, therefore potentially leading to uneven or irrelevant accounts. Likewise, feminist geographers and international relations scholars have admonished critical geopolitical scholarship for replicating the disembodied, distanced gaze of classical geopoliticians and with a heavy focus on discourse and representation that leaves geopolitics literally devoid of people (Dowler and Sharp 2001; Hyndman 2001; Massaro and Williams 2013). As Sharp (in Koopman et al. 2021) has recently written, the privileging of decoding political texts was critiqued as a continuation of the

masculinist practice of defining particular spaces as political, dynamic and important, which in turn resulted in the exclusion of other practices by identifying them as everyday, reproductive and inconsequential.

2.1.2 Feminist Geopolitics, Discourse and Materiality

This subsequently led to the establishment of a feminist geopolitics where Hyndman (2001), looked to shift the geopolitical focus away from the state through her concept of human security, which emphasises the body as the primary site of violence. In following a nuanced, embodied approach towards scale, feminist political geographical research has subsequently attended to war, violence and (in)security as intersecting, multi-scalar phenomena (see for example Fluri 2008; Hyndman 2010; Mountz 2004; see also Enloe 2001). Furthermore, how the body has been considered in feminist thought has been transformed by political events after 9/11. Chiefly as Hyndman (2010) notes, in contrast to their earlier attachment to the theory of performativity, the renowned feminist scholar Judith Butler has since recognised 'the human' as subject to vulnerability - insisting on the body as something that is material and that cannot be totally reducible to discourse. This emphasis on the body also links heavily to research on emotional geographies, where many (feminist) geographers have sought to both address and contest the ways in which fear has become central to the current, volatile geopolitical order (e.g. Hörschelmann 2008, Pain 2009; Pain and Smith 2008; Pain et al. 2010). As Pain and Smith (2008) discuss, fear has emerged as a globalised phenomenon and one that has only intensified further following the onset of the 'War on Terror'. They note that this has led scholars to hierarchically focus on the geopolitics of fear and thus neglect the complex, emotional geographies of everyday fears. Subsequently, they argue that fear should instead be understood as a material phenomenon that is simultaneously everyday and geopolitical - an argument that I return to in the next chapter. This type of work can be seen for instance in Megoran's (2008) account of how discourses of danger, as mediated through popular music, were used by the Uzbek state to maintain power, as well as Hopkins and Smith's (2008) study on the spatialities of 'racialised fear' with young Muslim men in Scotland. This builds on earlier work engaging with the spatialities and politics of fear, terror and (political) violence, from Thrift's (2007) analysis of the violent, biopolitical geographies of suicide bombers to Katz's (2007) discussion and development of the concept of 'banal terrorism' (see Gregory and Pred

2007). Altogether then, this work done by feminist scholars and other geographers illustrates how violence and geopolitics are entangled in multiple scales in everyday life.

Nevertheless, several scholars have since responded to and countered these critiques made by feminist scholars and others. Dalby (2010) has argued that as work going under the label of critical geopolitics proliferates, it risks becoming a 'catch-all' category that loses its critical purchase due to incorporating so many aims. Subsequently, Dalby calls for a refocusing and narrowing of its usage, arguing that scholars practicing critical geopolitics should focus on interrogating the "geostrategic knowledges used to legitimize warfare, and more generally security" (Dalby 2010: 286). Similarly, MacDonald (in Jones and Sage 2010: 318) warns that critical geopolitics has failed to produce a "serious challenge to the ways in which geopolitics is generally conceived and practiced 'in the world'" arguing that traditional geopolitical thinking is still being deployed by influential political actors (see also Koopman 2011). Additionally, in calling the distinction between 'small things' and 'big things' absurd, MacDonald argues that the discipline loses its critical purchase if it loses interest in the still-persisting theories of classical geopolitics. Meanwhile, Mamadouh (also in Jones and Sage 2009) surmises that critical geopolitics has an 'identity problem' in lacking a single, exact and undisputed definition. She also argues that it restricts itself to the deconstruction of discourses and fails to reconstruct alternative ones, while commenting that there is currently a perceived disengagement with the geopolitics dominating US politics as a result of the discipline's diversification. Significantly, in a more recent review of the discipline Sharp (in Koopman et al. 2021) recognises and responds to Dalby's critique. Sharp argues that while feminist geopolitics has successfully attended to the consequences and effects of geopolitical processes on everyday spaces and thus enabled greater insights into the power of hegemonic geopolitics to inscribe identities and morality onto the bodies of various communities, it frequently implies this is a one-way process. Pertinently however, Sharp points to more recent feminist geopolitical scholarship that has attended to the ways in which the materiality of the everyday, of bodies and of things, work to constitute geopolitical systems. This engagement with materiality within feminist scholarship will be outlined in further detail in the next chapter, however, now the discussion turns to how work in critical military geographies (including that which intersects with much of this feminist geopolitical scholarship) has attended to notions of war and violence.

2.1.3 Critical Military Studies

There has been a great deal of work from outside of critical geopolitics that has attended to notions of war and violence. A key figure here is Rachel Woodward (2005) who in developing a critical military geography, has called for scholars to trace the connections between the small, mundane things associated with militarism and military activities that make war possible, to better understand the full extent of their geographical constitution and expression. Pertinently, Woodward argues that there is a moral imperative for human geographers in this violent, militarised world to make visible war and its effects (see also Flint 2005; also see Thrift 2000 for a critical geopolitical perspective). Subsequently, in the context of post-9/11, geographers and other social scientists have attended to a variety of military issues. Such work has explored; shifts in the spatiality of armed conflict arising from new modes of warfare (e.g. Graham 2009; Gregory 2011; Sassen 2010); the wider, shifting political geographies of the economy, security and power (Cowen and Smith 2009; Dalby 2010; Flusty et al. 2008); and the myriad geographies of militarisation in everyday life (Bernazzoli and Flint 2010; Carter et al. 2016; Sidaway 2009). As part of this, an interdisciplinary body of research going under the label of critical military studies has engaged with military, defence and security issues on the understanding that military processes and practices are the outcome of social life and political contestation (Woodward 2014). Two key concepts here are militarism and militarisation. As Kuus in Flusty et al. (2008) and later Woodward (2014) and Rech et al. (2016) write, militarism can be defined as ideologies which prioritise military capabilities in the resolution of conflicts, while the term militarisation denotes the complex, multi-dimensional set of social processes and practices through which military approaches to social problems gain elite and popular acceptance.

Rech et al. (2015) have argued that geography's long-standing engagements with notions of representation, landscape and scale allows for richer accounts of the spatialities of militarism and military activities in critical military studies. Here they explore the spatiality of military representations, but also consider how practices of representation become co-constitutive of militarism. Likewise, they turn to literature attending to the intersections between the military and landscapes, in which scholars have explored how spaces have become instructive of, and

(re)configured by, processes of militarisation (e.g. Graham 2009; Higate and Henry 2011; Rech 2015). Finally, in questioning the scale at which we consider militarism and war to operate, several geographers have attended to the 'smaller' military geographies that work beyond the state, with Rech et al. (2015) elucidating how granular, more localised and individualised analyses of militaries and their activities can engender greater insights into the ways in which militarism and militarisation operate. Subsequently, as Rech et al. conclude, an approach centred explicitly on spatiality enables richer accounts of the myriad ways through which militarism is not only geographically expressed and constituted, but also located and reproduced in everyday, local, and personal sites of militarisation.

In exploring themes of militarism and violence, many political geographers have subsequently identified both war and its counterpart peace as ambiguous concepts (Cowen and Gilbert 2007; Gregory 2011; Mamadouh 2005; Megoran 2011). As Woodward (2004) argues, war has increasingly been used as a 'catch-all term' to describe the manifestation and culmination of military activities shaped by militarism. Additionally, there has been recognition that war varies in its form and geographies, a term that has been used to refer to an array of struggles within the media and literature, including for example inner-city violence and riots (Flint 2005; Mamadouh 2005). Thus war has become understood as a pervasive and repetitive phenomenon, and one that has long been a significant and disruptive feature of everyday life (Cowen and Gilbert 2007; Mamadouh 2005; Woodward 2004, 2005). Alongside this there has been a body of scholarship on the geographies of peace, with Megoran (2011) calling for political geographers not just to conceptualise peace and trace its multiple relationships with violence, but to also be committed to building peace in their work (see also McConnell et al. 2014). Significantly, as Fluri (2022) recently surmises, war and peace, and corresponding notions of violence and security are interconnected partners in an assemblage of political and economic co-dependence. In discussing the diverse and multiple manifestations of political, state and counter-state violence, Fluri instead recognises peace as not the opposite of war, but a temporal substitute that engages in non-military, institutional and structural forms of violence. In disentangling war and violence as synonymous terms, Fluri usefully foregrounds how there are a multiplicity of violence(s) that should be paid attention to within (political) geographical scholarship. While as Springer and Le Billon (2016) point out, violence itself is an incredibly complex and ambiguous phenomena in terms of its relations to power, material

expression(s) and spatialities. In recognising how geographers have engaged with the ways in which violence as a political process shapes space in both its spectacular and banal forms, they call for sustained conversation on the violent geographies that shape our daily lives, our encounters with institutions and the various structures that configure our social organisation. As such, this research attends to the diverse forms of violence, beyond just representations of military violence, which emerge through the playing and streaming of Battle Royale videogames across a number of places, spaces and scales.

2.1.4 Bourdieu, Capital and Symbolic Violence

I argue that these accounts of a diversity of violences should also include notions of symbolic violence, as conceptualised by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu who has written extensively on the relationship between different forms of capital and the reproduction of class status in contemporary society. Bourdieu (1986) refers to four fundamental forms of capital - social, cultural/informational, economic and symbolic - which individuals use as resources in their everyday lives. Cultural capital refers to the knowledge, skills and information that people acquire through formal or informal education, existing in three forms: in the embodied state (such as jargon, music), in the objectified state as material objects and media (such as books, instruments and machines), and in an institutionalised form, typically symbolised by academic qualifications. Economic capital denotes the income and assets people own. While social capital refers to the sum of resources (actual or virtual) that accrue to an individual or group as a result of a network of social connections (Bourdieu 1986; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Crucially, as Bourdieu (1986) points out, these forms of capital are all related to each other not valued equally in society, where through a system of exchanges some forms of capital are afforded greater value or legitimacy – i.e. symbolic capital – than others. To put it another way, the capitals of some groups are arbitrarily deemed more valuable than others and conferred with social advantage, being dependent on the social space within which individuals operate and the dispositions people embody as a result of social conditioning (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992).

Significantly, Bourdieu argues that social capital is related to that of economic capital, and together with cultural capital is used (consciously and unconsciously) to reproduce power

relations and forms of access to resources that tend to reproduce existing distributions of power and capitals. Here Bourdieu refers to symbolic violence as the harm arising from the almost unconscious ways structures and hierarchies that are internalised by subjects and therefore rendered normal (Schubert 2013). In other words, symbolic violence is a generally unperceived or gentler form of violence, where in contrast to systems in which force is needed to maintain social hierarchy, to exercise their dominance, elites tacitly carry out their everyday practices while abiding by the rules of the system that provides them their positions of privilege to in turn reproduce and naturalise such hierarchies. While more influential in fields of anthropology, educational research and cultural studies, a number of geographers, while critical of Bourdieu's limited understanding of space (see Holt 2008), have since used Bourdieu's ideas, including those around social and cultural capital in their own work (see also Ergler and Wood 2019). For instance, using Bourdieu's reading of social capital, Holton (2016) explores how university-managed accommodation may perpetuate disadvantaged access to social capital among students, while others surpass this through using other forms of non-student social capital to legitimise their position among their peers in these spaces. While through an engagement with notions of cultural capital, Waters (2006) unpacks the meanings and consequences of international education in Hong Kong, revealing how migration to Canada has enabled middle-class families to accumulate a more valuable form of cultural capital. Specifically, in allowing children to obtain a 'Western' university degree and access a transnational network of Canadian-educated students, graduates and employers are able to then reproduce their class position. Together then, this work has illustrated the geographical dimensions of social and cultural capital.

Yet strikingly, there has been a relative paucity of studies on the geographies of symbolic violence, despite how geographers have otherwise deeply and critically engaged with the intersections between race, gender and violence across a number of spaces and scales-including the body (e.g. Clark 2017; Hyndman 2010; Little 2020). Indeed, I believe a further consideration of symbolic violence in geography would bring much to this already rich vein of scholarship, especially in how it uncovers some of the less obvious spatial, social and everyday dimensions of violence. For instance, Morgan and Björkert (2006) in engaging with women who have (also) experienced domestic violence, shed light on features of symbolic violence embedded in everyday life such as consent, complicity and misrecognition, as well as in

institutional language and the implementation of procedural norms around women's safety in public spaces. Likewise, Gast (2018) demonstrates the power of language in exploring how black students and teachers of varying social-class backgrounds perform symbolic violence through routinely legitimating race-class stereotypes in a diverse school. While Cui and Worrell (2019) examine the impact of the media on Chinese Canadian youth's identity construction, arguing that the symbolic violence it exercises does not only reproduce racial inequality institutionally and systemically, but also contribute to the development of different forms of racialised dispositions among Chinese youth individually. Subsequently, my research explores how through everyday practices related to Battle Royale videogames and streams, young people accrue these varying forms of capital and in turn may enact symbolic violence and reinforce hierarchies of class, race and gender. Furthermore, there will be a focus on the language used within the gaming technoculture and in particular, how this often trends towards toxicity and discrimination in further enactments of symbolic violence. In doing so, this thesis seeks to shed light on the various dimensions of "Empire" and the prosaic practices and diversity of violence(s) that lead to its reproduction in everyday life.

Building on this scholarship, this thesis will map how this diversity of violence(s) emerge through, constitute and intersect with each other in the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and streams. Here I refer to somatic violence as that which is enacted on the body. In particular, I attend to the force(s) put on young gamers as they embody particular subjectivities of Empire, namely that of the 'citizen-soldier' and the 'worker-consumer'. For instance in Chapter 9, I consider how addiction may be considered as a form of somatic violence generated through the micro-commodification and gambification of gaming. There is ludic violence, which I define as the violence enacted through playful and/or humorous practices. To elucidate, here I expand on Payne's (2010) notion of ludic war (see Chapter 3) in looking at the various forms of physical and digitally-mediated violence that may emerge through the playing and streaming of (Battle Royale) videogames that are not necessarily militaristic or military-themed in nature. Likewise, I explore how these ludic assemblages are generative of symbolic violence, which again as conceptualised by Bourdieu, describes the softer form of violence resulting from structures and hierarchies that are internalised by subjects and are almost unconsciously performed within elite's everyday practices. This in turn is strongly associated with what I denote as structural violence, the violence produced through

the structural conditions that are co-constitutive of everyday life, i.e. “Empire”. Altogether, in tracing these multiple, overlapping forms of prosaic violence, i.e. the more mundane, everyday practices of violence beyond ‘actual’ war, I seek to highlight its ambiguity in everyday life and complex relations with other similarly ambiguous notions of play and geopolitics. Accordingly, the next section considers the complex ways through which geopolitics, the everyday and popular culture intersect.

2.2 Popular and Everyday Geopolitics

Popular geopolitics refers to the discourses associated with popular culture and the media, as well as the eponymous study of these popular geopolitical discourses. The grounds for this body of scholarship came from work by the two political geographers Jo Sharp and Klaus Dodds. Sharp's (2000) “Condensing the Cold War”, examined the representations of Russia in the American magazine *Reader's Digest* published during the Cold War period. While Dodds (2003) has studied the geopolitics of James Bond movies. Here, influenced by philosophers such as Michel Foucault, Antonio Gramsci and Edward Said, as well as O'Tuathail, Dalby and Agnew, they both pushed the boundaries of what was deemed as legitimate research within the field of critical geopolitics (Dittmer 2018). As Dittmer (2015a) reflects, research into popular culture within political geography and IR was often seen as frivolous, as these disciplines traditionally predisposed scholars to attend to macro-scaled analyses of power. Although it should be said, as documented by Horton (2018) and Kinsley (2016) that within the discipline of geography as a whole there remains a relative paucity of research into popular culture, with scholarly engagements tending to be coy, time-lagged and uneven in nature.

Nevertheless, since Sharp's and Dodds' work, a growing number of academics have conducted analyses on a range of different mediums including: comic books; particularly Jason Dittmer (2005, 2007, 2011) and his work on nationalist superheroes like Captain America; cinema (e.g. Dalby 2008; Power and Crampton 2005; Saunders 2012); cartoons (Dodds 2007; Ridanpää 2009); and video games (including for example: Power 2007; Salter 2011; Shaw 2010). This blossoming of popular geopolitical scholarship is based on the idea that understandings of geopolitics have become increasingly shaped by popular culture (Pickering 2017). Indeed, Sharp (2000) reasoned that the neat distinctions between popular, practical and formal

geopolitics had eroded as a result of the accelerating mediation of geographical imaginings in 'ordinary' people's daily lives. This suggestion has been reiterated and widely supported by several scholars since (e.g. Dittmer and Bos 2019; Grayson 2018; Saunders 2012), who have subsequently considered how the blurring of those distinctions stems from social practices of intertextuality and through processes of globalisation. The former term refers to the ways in which texts exist not as singular artefacts, but instead can be understood in relation with other texts that constitute a whole 'literature', with this synergy of ideas, actions and speech being integral to the workings of geopolitics (Dittmer and Bos 2019). While as Saunders (2012: 83) argues, through processes of globalisation, and specifically the transnationalisation of media products, there has been a reconfiguration of the processes through which geopolitical imaginations leak into public consciousness, as citizens feel the impacts of global flows of information, money and people on their daily lives. Popular geopolitical scholarship focusing on this blurring has for example, examined the rise of celebrity geopolitics and how famous figures blur the lines between elite and popular geopolitical discourse (Benwell et al. 2012). Likewise, it has explored how social media technology has enabled the production of geopolitical knowledges via social practices of citizen statecraft and creative diplomacy (Pinkerton and Benwell 2014). Moreover, there has been a focus on the geopolitics of conspiracy, with these narratives permeating across spheres of politics, science and popular culture and becoming a regular feature within contemporary global life (Jones 2012). Subsequently, this research will look at the ways in which videogames and other forms of popular culture and media have shaped young people's understandings of global political space.

Nonetheless, as the study of popular geopolitics has risen in popularity, it has developed in a variety of ways over time in response to a number of critiques. Indeed, Grayson (2018) identifies the three most commonly made critiques of this strand of research. The first is that popular geopolitics is ocular-centric, privileging the sense of sight over our other senses when determining what is worthy of our attention, how we conduct this research and how we analyse and interpret geopolitical practices and objects. The second critique is that there has been an overlooking of the role of audience and reception, as well as the ways in which audiences actually interpret these geopolitical 'texts'. The third and most frequently made critique of popular geopolitics (and indeed as discussed earlier, the discipline of critical

geopolitics as a whole) is the overwhelming tendency to deconstruct 'texts' produced by (media) elites, alongside a post-structural impulse to interpret everything as 'text' (e.g. Megoran 2006; Muller 2008; Thrift 2000).

2.2.1 Popular Geopolitics 2.0

Much work has been conducted since that recognises these critiques (and especially the latter two). For instance, Dittmer and Dodds (2008) have argued for a more theoretical connection to related areas within cultural studies, calling for greater attention to be paid to audience interpretation, consumption and attachment. One key idea here is that of the active audience, where instead of being seen as passive or 'cultural dupes' those who consume media and popular culture are recognised as creators of meaning (Dittmer and Bos 2019; Dittmer and Dodds 2008; Dittmer and Gray 2010; Dodds 2006; Woon 2014). This extends on Livingston (2005) who outlines how an individual's interpretations of a text are shaped by their identity as members of an interpretative or imagined community, be it a nation or a religion, as well as their embeddedness in various social networks. Similarly, Dittmer and Dodds (2008) discuss how fandoms, that is groups of fans who invest high levels of cultural and emotional capital in a specific element of popular culture, are active audiences due to their high level of engagement with media. Significantly, as Hills (2002) states, fans are not simply readers of text, but are also performers of certain practices. In other words, they can be seen as engaging in practices of performative consumption, where culture is constantly in process as it is open to reinterpretation by its audience (Dittmer and Bos 2019). This is vital when considering the agency of young gamers who participate in a wider gaming scene and have various engagements with popular culture.

Similarly, two years on from the Dittmer and Dodds (2008) paper, Dittmer and Gray (2010) attempted to reframe popular geopolitics into a project - specifically a "Popular Geopolitics 2.0" - centred on the quotidian practices and performances that constitute the everyday geopolitical experience. Instead of using an agency-centred conceptualisation of discourse, they argue that power should be seen as something that is diffuse and produced relationally. Furthermore, in discussing the work done on embodiment, emotions, affects, performativity and post-human networks intersecting feminist geopolitics, non-representational theory (NRT)

and audience studies, they outline how these three literatures have influenced popular geopolitics, as scholars increasingly attend to “the everyday ways in which people *live* geopolitics” (Dittmer and Gray 2010: 1671: original authors’ emphasis in italics). Here they point to Sidaway’s (2009) account of walking on the South West Coast Path - in which he elucidates how geopolitics, war and militarism are encountered in, and constitutive of the urban landscapes of Plymouth - as an example of scholarship that elides the traditional boundaries of popular, practical and formal geopolitics, in calling for more research into the geopolitical everyday. Subsequently, geographers in popular geopolitics have referred to ideas from feminist geopolitics, NRT and audience studies in work going under this label of “Popular Geopolitics 2.0”. For instance, Kirby (2015) has studied the gender politics of the Hunger Games film series in analysing how feminist film critics consider the protagonist of the films as a progressive, feminist symbol. Likewise, Mostafanezhad (2017) turns to notions of affect and emotion in exploring the trans-scalar linkages between popular culture and everyday geopolitical experience emerging from celebrity humanitarianism, using the example of Angelina Jolie and the constitution of a geopolitics of hope among Burmese exiles on the Burma/Thailand border. Moreover, as will be detailed further in Chapters 3 and 7 there has been a body of work exploring the discourses and affects of geopolitical humour, satire and irony within popular culture and everyday life (e.g. Dodds and Kirby 2013; Ridanpää 2009, 2014; Thorogood 2016; Van Ramshorst 2019). Pertinently, this scholarship includes Dittmer (2015b) who as part of this body of work has further explored the affective potential for humour and laughter to remake (geopolitical) subjectivities in the virtual diplomatic assemblages of role-playing simulations of *Model United Nations*. These studies illustrate just some of the ways in which academics have begun to directly engage with the quotidian nature of popular geopolitics. Significantly however, Dittmer also adds to research done in geography on the relations between geopolitics and play, an area of scholarship outlined in the following section.

2.3 Play

As Woodyer (2012) writes, play within the social sciences has traditionally been understood in two reductive and seemingly paradoxical ways. The first is the utilitarian perspective, which has informed nearly a century of child development study and has framed play as a process of learning and development occurring only during childhood - overlooking the persisting

attraction of play to adults (Stevens 2007). The second and most pertinent to this discussion here is the non-instrumental perspective, which defines play against work. A key proponent of this perspective is the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga (1949) who in the seminal text, *Homo Ludens* outlines six specific qualities of play. These characteristics are that play is: voluntary (it cannot be forced to order); superfluous (it is neither a physical necessity nor a moral duty); not 'real' life (it has a disposition of its own); disinterested (it stands outside the satisfaction of our wants and needs); secluded (it has a distinct locality and duration); and creates order (it has its own internal rules). This perspective has since been supported and developed further by several scholars, such as the sociologist Roger Caillois (1961: 5) who argues that "[p]lay is an occasion of pure waste: waste of time, energy, ingenuity, skill, and often of money". Caillois suggests that all play activities can be assessed along a continuum moving from *paidia*, improvised playful actions, to *ludus*, structured activities with explicit rules i.e. games. Furthermore, he delineates play into four different categories; competition (*âgon*), chance (*alea*), simulation (*mimicry*), and vertigo (*ilinx*), which he uses to demonstrate how play is different to work. Likewise, the Thrift (1997) who in spite of his otherwise valuable insights of play as a process of performative experimentation and conceptualisation of resistance (which will be outlined further later in this section) also maintains classic non-instrumental notions of play. Ultimately then, although these theorists provide useful ways of describing play, the non-instrumental perspective is problematic in its binary construction of rational, productive work and 'irrational', wasteful play - and thus explains the scant attention paid to play within academia.

As Woodyer (2012) contends then, both these contradictory perspectives imply a third approach to play, where play is seen as ambiguous and thus difficult to qualify. This ambiguity is extensively outlined by the play theorist, Sutton-Smith (1997) who by drawing on seven popular rhetorics of play – play as progress, fate, power, identity, imaginary, of the self and frivolous – talks about how almost anything can allow play to occur within its boundaries. Another key figure here is the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott who has developed the notion of transitional space, a playful/experimental space that exists between the inner world of subjective fantasy and the outer world of objective reality, whereby a child develops their sense of the self/other (Harker 2005; Shaw 2010). By doing so, Winnicott contextualises play in both time and space. However, equally as important here, he foregrounds the importance

of objects to/in play, attends to the creativity of play and acknowledges how 'playing is doing' - themes that a number of academics have since taken further in their research on play. Nevertheless, as Harker (2004) writes, despite Winnicott's otherwise valuable insights, his work here is both limited and underscored by his rather reductive definition of play as a developmental activity. This definition which Sutton-Smith (1997) refers to as the rhetoric of "play-as-progress" is problematic in terms of how it 'others' play as something that is done only by 'less-than-adults', with Sutton-Smith also remarking that the correlation between (complexity of) play and development is often mistaken for causation. Yet, what Sutton-Smith misses as he attempts to put all his rhetorics of play under one overlapping definition, is the fact that playing is a form of practice. Here then it is important to turn to the performance theorist Schechner (1993), who in his work on playing as ritual, calls for attention to be brought to fluid, polymorphous processes of playing rather than static, discrete events of play. Moreover, Schechner uses the striking metaphor of the net to describe the dynamic, flexible and porous 'container' that stabilises performances of playing, thus enabling scholars to recognise how varying temporal and spatial registers in which playing takes place. Although crucially as Harker (2005) remarks, Schechner's metaphor of the net fails to account for the creative potential of playing to create time and space (see Aitken 2001). Or in other words, there should be greater emphasis placed on play as a verb rather a noun - a notion this thesis takes forward in exploring the vitality of (game)play.

2.3.1 The Geographies of Play

In building on the notion of play as a practice, Woodyer (2012) subsequently conceptualises play according to three, intersecting frames of reference; the first of which is playing and the everyday. For instance, the urban design theorist Stevens (2007) has through Caillois' four-part definition of play explored the everyday but non-conventional uses of public space where playing is positioned against the spatial and representational regulation of urban space. Stevens (2007: 218) argues that "play is the actualization of freedom, adventure, creativity and discovery, although not in any fixed sense" with urban public space foregrounding the "playful production of the different and the new". Likewise, research by geographers studying workplaces and children's everyday geographies has examined the complex relations between work and play. For instance, Crang (1994) in his account of doing waiting work at the liminal leisure space of the restaurant, examines how the co-presence of production and consumption

in service work 'implodes' the real and conceptual distance between work and play. However, Crang does not see this relationship between work and play as one of colonisation under an ever-invasive capitalist system driving the commodification of cultural life. Instead, he considers this relationship as one of entanglement where "[w]ork was made playful; and yet, at the same time, the fun we had was made into paid work" (Crang 1994: 699). While in a significant study of Sudanese village children, Katz (2004) describes how elements of both playing and working intertwined throughout their everyday lives as they acquired, practiced and altered environmental knowledge. She argues that the valorisation of work and trivialisation of play has only occurred as a result of the 'new' conditions driven by political-economic changes associated with capitalism. The relations between playing and the everyday are also offset by the 'as-ifness' quality of play, i.e. the imaginary enacting of play as-if it was real. Subsequently, playing can be seen as a liminoid activity that refracts, discloses and transforms aspects of everyday life and enables players to become conscious of certain practices and relationships that they normally non-cognitively enact and engage with (Katz 2004). Or as Aitken (2001: 180) explains "giving young people space is more about giving them room to play, it is giving them the opportunity for unchallenged and critical reflection on experiences".

This notion of playing as transformative links to Woodyer's (2012) second frame of reference; playing and politics. Drawing on Walter Benjamin's (1986) musings on the mimetic faculty, Katz (2004) has explored the ways in which playing mimics familiar socio-material practices, yet is open-ended in terms of how such practices are enacted, meaning that playing has the potential to reimagine things, relations and ourselves in other ways. Importantly, however as scholars like Katz (2004) and Harker (2005) note, such playing performances tend to normalise roles, practices and spaces as they are constrained by habit, reflecting how the mimicking of familiar practices through playing is limited by our embodiment. Moreover, even though the 'irrational' act of playing is often perceived as a form of resistance against other 'rational' spaces and practices of everyday life, players primarily engage in such acts for their own enjoyment (Aitken 2001). Remarking then how traditional notions of resistance have been critiqued for relying on the dichotomy of the powerful and the dominated, Woodyer (2012) discusses Thrift's (1997) alternative perspective of resistance as expressive rather than oppositional. Through a decentred understanding of power and subjectivity, where power is

not assumed or fixed, but rather a contingent, relational achievement, Thrift explores how dance can be thought of as a form of presentational communication, i.e. as a means to articulate complexes of thought-with-feeling. As such, Thrift emphasises the practical, enactment, presentations and subjectification over the cognitive, preposition, representations and the subject respectively. In a similar vein, Malbon (1999) in his exploration of the cultures and spaces of clubbing conceptualises resistance as playful vitality. Usefully, Malbon (1999: 148) stresses vitality as the internal purpose of playing, which is both an “engagement with and expression of” a power that is achieved from within - this being a “form of micro-power or ‘vitality’ that is inhabited through play”. In this way, playing can be thought of as a characteristic of many of our everyday enactments and practices, or as Woodyer (2012: 319) puts it “playing’s vital nature also affirms its everyday character”.

This brings us to Woodyer’s (2012) third frame of reference, which is that playing exceeds representation and ‘rationality’. One key idea here is that playing is spontaneous and that creative, playful happenings can unfold in, between and across a multiplicity of spaces and places, such as the classroom (Harker 2005), the urban outdoors (Stevens 2007) and the restaurant (Crang 1996). Moreover, playing can be productive or transformative of space, configuring imaginative, micro-scale, virtual and affective spaces. In this way then, the reciprocal relations between ourselves and the world that emerge from embodiment in play afford a process of becoming. Thus, as Woodyer (2012: 320) reasons, playing offers “the possibility of configuring alternate ways of being-in-the-world” where our actions are enactments of a world. This in turn links back to Malbon’s (1999) concept of playful vitality, where a player’s sense of the self is displaced when they become ‘lost in the moment’ as energy flows through them in an intimate and shared embodied experience with other players. In understanding this process of becoming, it is also important to consider the ‘intensity’ of playing, that is the affects that both move and emerge through the relations between bodies (see Anderson 2006). For instance, as Harker (2005) writes, playing typically heightens the affective register, as it is dependent on non-cognitive (physical and emotional) processes. Subsequently, as Woodyer (2012) argues it is important to use methods that enable us to better comprehend the more-than-cognitive quality of playing, be it ethnography like Harker (2005) and Malbon (1999) or other non-representational methods guided towards researching everyday life. Thus, to summarise, Woodyer (2012) highlights the ways in which playing

reconfigures the self and space-time, and in doing so has raised a number of important themes and ideas that have been key to the development of ludic geographies.

2.3.2 Play and Children's Geographies

Play as a theme within geography has previously been relegated to the literature around the sub-discipline of children's geographies (see Skelton 2009; see also Holloway and Valentine 2000). Here scholarship has unpacked adultist, hegemonic discourses around both childhood and the temporalities and spatialities of play, with academics exploring the relations between playing and working and in turn recognising children as active social actors (e.g. Harker 2005; Katz 2004; Punch 2000). For example, Punch (2000) demonstrates how children in rural Bolivia actively negotiate ways to assert their spatial and temporal autonomy by transforming the spaces they use for work and school into play spaces that exist outside of parental control. Moreover, she reminds us that hegemonic, idealistic conceptualisations of play are Minority World (Western) discourses, i.e. the construct of a carefree childhood dedicated to school and play, when in economically poor countries of the Majority World, childhood involves work, school and play. While again Katz's (2004) research, as part of work unpacking the notion of the 'work-free childhood' explores how children's workloads and domestic work patterns have been increased and altered as a result of development projects and international trade inequalities. Likewise, as Woodyer et al. (2016) discuss, in contesting pervasive Western ideologies about children being innocent, dependent and vulnerable and thus unsafe in the dangerous outside world, a great deal of geographical work has engaged with children's play in different public and outdoor spaces (e.g. Kraftl et al. 2013; Matthews et al. 2000; McKendrick et al. 2000; Skelton 2000). In particular, there has been a strong focus on school and public playgrounds with scholars exploring how children actively and differentially negotiate these 'child-centric' spaces that have been constructed according to adultist discourses (e.g. Hemming 2007; Karsten 2003; Thomson 2005). Furthermore, research by children's geographers has challenged developmental understandings of play by recognising children as full human beings rather than human 'becomings' and attending to their everyday practices of living (see Holloway and Valentine 2000). For instance, Thomson and Philo (2004) have explored children's social micro-geographies of playing and 'being' across various, disorganised spaces, while Tucker (2003) has accounted for generational differentiation in teenage girls' uses of recreational spaces. Altogether, this stand of literature within children's

geographies has helped to illustrate how play and work intertwine in children's everyday lives, while also shedding light on the heterogeneity and agency of children in shaping wider society.

Nevertheless, as Woodyer (2012) argues, the common association of play with childhood is problematic, both by how it ignores adult play, and by how more generally it hinders our appreciation of play as an important geographical concern (see Woodyer et al. 2016 for a more comprehensive critique of children's geographies). Here Woodyer (2012: 313) calls for greater engagement with 'the ludic' beyond childhood, designating the term ludic geographies as "the study of being playful throughout the lifecourse and a playful way of working as geographers". Work by ludic geographers has subsequently examined children's domestic play with toys and popular cultural forms, paying attention to not just the spatialities of play, but also offering insights about play's materiality, affectivity, vitality and politics (Carter et al. 2016; Horton 2010, 2012). Notably, there is a small body of work attending to children's war play - often labelled as ludic geopolitics - intersecting with scholarship engaging with children and young people as (geo)political actors (see Benwell and Hopkins 2016), everyday geopolitics and critical military studies (see Dittmer and Gray 2010; see also Rech et al. 2015). Here geographers have engaged with the ways in which war toys, war games, and play are both reflective and constitutive of geopolitical climates and cultures of militarism (Carter et al. 2016; Macdonald 2008; Woodyer and Carter 2020). Pertinently, Carter et al. (2016) and later Woodyer and Carter (2020) have explored how children develop (geopolitical) subjectivities through play, illustrating how geopolitics itself is produced through the encounters between texts, objects, bodies, and practices. This notion of play as a geopolitical encounter will be further expanded on in the next chapter.

Furthermore, as advocates for the study of play, Woodyer (2018) and Horton (2018) have encouraged researchers to cultivate an ethic of playfulness in their research while avoiding romanticising play, remarking that a great deal of phenomena worthy of academic attention has been left 'unplayed with'. Indeed, like both authors above I argue that this research in ludic geographies while insightful remains limited. For instance, despite Woodyer's (2012) call for geographers to look at play beyond just childhood, scant attention has been paid to adult play - except perhaps with videogames (and even then as I argue later this is somewhat lacking). As

Woodyer (2018) and Horton (2018, 2019) write, this is due to a disinclination amongst geographers to be playful and look at certain elements of popular culture because of several aesthetic (i.e. normative judgements) and institutional factors (Skelton 2018). As will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter, as a counter to this reluctance this research involved myself being wilfully playful in engaging with play through assemblage. However, this chapter will now review scholarship on videogames within the social sciences and humanities, specifically focusing on their geopolitical dimensions and ultimately how videogames are instruments of “Empire”.

2.4 Videogames

The study of videogames has largely fallen under the domain of game studies, a flourishing, interdisciplinary body of research - and subfield of cultural studies - that in recent times has primarily focused on the medium as a phenomenon of great (cultural) significance (e.g. Malaby and Burke 2009; Raessens 2006; Shaw 2010). Initially this work was engrossed in debates about how to define, classify and actually study videogames. In attempting to justify, formalise and legitimise game studies as a proper field of study and games as a specialist object of study, a range of scholars sought to show how videogames are different from, or similar to, other media. As a result of these debates, scholars were categorised into two opposing groups; the ‘narratologists’ and the ‘ludologists’ (Mäyrä 2008; Shaw 2010; Tavinor 2009). Narratologists view videogames as new forms of ‘story-telling’ or ‘text’, and subsequently have used existing theories of narrative to explore representational issues like race, gender, and sexuality (e.g. Krzywinska 2006). Whereas, ludologists argue that videogames should be understood on their own terms, and accordingly attend to game mechanisms, player’s interactions with them and ‘experiences’ of gameplay (e.g. Ash 2009; Boellstorff 2006; Shaw and Warf 2009). As Malaby and Burke (2009) elucidate, this debate was in part shaped by how many ludologists have argued for game studies to be a distinct, formalised discipline, whereas many narratologists and other scholars were more interested in the field remaining permanently as an inter-discipline. Importantly though as Malaby and Burke (2009) also write, what would be a ‘logical’ move to disciplinarity would be shaped by the greater structural pressures to institutionalise work on games.

Nevertheless, as game studies has evolved, it has started to move past the narratology vs ludology debate, which has since been considered to be founded on a false dichotomy and seen as an oversimplification of the field (Raessens 2006). As Tavinor (2009) writes, attempts to properly define 'videogames' by ludologists and narratologists alike are insufficient, as they would exclude games that lack the supposed key characteristic feature and incorporate items that have it but are not videogames. For instance, under stricter 'narratological' approaches, *Tetris* would not be classified as a videogame, while approaches that use broader notions of narrative to include *Tetris* make the term narrative rather hollow as it could for example then be applied to CCTV footage. Whereas, formalist 'ludological' approaches overlook open-ended games like *SimCity*, but include game-books and role-playing games like *Dungeons and Dragons* (see also Juul 2005). Instead, Tavinor (2009) contends that the generic term 'videogame' should be pragmatically defined as nominal category, i.e. one that contingently groups together a particular set of objects, as it would enable us to better understand the continuity of 'videogames' with other cultural forms. Additionally, he tries to reconcile the two opposing perspectives in arguing how an object can be defined as a videogame by having two distinguishable features; that is a) it exists as artefact in a visual medium, and b) it is intended as an object for entertainment. Likewise, Ian Bogost (2006: xiii), an academic and video game designer, simply refers to videogames as being "varieties of digital artefacts created and played on arcade machines, personal computers and home consoles", noting his contentment for the term videogame to be understood in its "loose and popular sense". In a similar vein, Ash and Gallacher (2011: 352) describe the term videogame as referring "less to a single identifiable object and more to a plethora of technologies, genres and materialities". This research agrees with the sentiments of Tavinor, Bogost and Ash and Gallacher, in that videogames should be referred to in their most popular sense, as it allows for more intellectual freedom in how we talk about the medium. In other words, instead of being constrained in following either a narratological or a ludological approach towards certain games, research on games can be seen as falling somewhere on a continuum. For instance, at first glance as multi-player games in which players compete against each other, studies of the Battle Royale genre lend towards more of a ludological approach. Yet, Battle Royale games such as *Call of Duty: Warzone* and *Fortnite* often include quest elements, player vs the environment (PvE) content and have a loose overarching meta-narrative. As such, research on the genre would fall somewhere in the middle of this narratological/ludological spectrum. Ultimately, in taking into account both the power of narrative and the structure of rule-based play, videogaming can instead be better

understood a type of becoming, a process grounded in (and emerging from) human practice (e.g. Giddings 2009; Malaby 2007; Shaw and Sharp 2013; Shaw 2010; Taylor 2009).

2.4.1 Videogames in Everyday Life

The arbitrary ludological/narratological divide can also be critiqued for how it implicitly supported the conceptualisation of (video)games as ‘magic circles’, an idea derived by inaccurate readings of the work of Dutch historian Johan Huizinga (Calleja 2012; Consalvo 2009; Malaby 2007; Taylor 2006). This theorisation asserts that the rules of everyday life cannot be applied to all games because they take place in a separate, bounded space of play, structured by a different set of rules. However, as Consalvo (2009) argues, the conceptualisation of games as ‘magic circles’ disregards how in reality games take place in relation to everyday structures, rules and contexts, with play contingent on a number of intersecting social, cultural and geographical processes. A number of social scientists have explored how videogaming has blurred the distinctions between work and play and enabled the extension of capital(ism) into increasing aspects of our everyday lives (e.g. Ash 2012a; Shaw and Warf 2009; Taylor et al. 2015). As Yee (2006: 68) states:

“Video games play important roles in the increasingly blurred intersections of our social, economic, and political spheres, and articulating those blurred boundaries in the microcosm of video games reveals larger trends in our digitally mediated world”.

Subsequently, scholars have explored how players of massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) engage in work-like activities such as generating the materials and equipment that drive the game’s robust virtual economy, illustrating how videogames are both implicated in and reflective of ‘real-world’ capitalist systems (Schulzke 2014; Taylor et al. 2015; Taylor 2006). Within this strand of scholarship, some geographers have attended to the uniquely interactive and affective nature of videogames in exploring how the sensory experiences of players have been commodified and manipulated by game designers to achieve commercial success (Ash 2012a, 2013, 2015; Shaw and Warf 2009). As part of this literature on the attention/experience economy, research has also attended to micro-transactions as part of a wider process of the gamblification of gaming (Johnson and Brock 2020). Likewise, recent work by game scholars has engaged with live-streaming (on Twitch) by attending to the ways in which streamers engage in performing emotional, affective and immaterial labour as they transform their play

into work (Johnson and Woodcock 2019; Woodcock and Johnson 2019). This is why as I argue later, it is vital to explore how these games have become socially and economically embedded in everyday life if we are to better understand their multitudinous potential to animate and destabilise “Empire”.

A great deal of this research focusing on the materialities has been informed by scholarship engaging with digital geographies and the geographies of popular culture, where in recent times there has been growing attention placed on the cultural geographies of videogaming (see Ash and Gallacher 2011 for an overview). Here much of the literature has been concerned with the representations and politics of videogames, analysing games through the lens of race (Leonard 2009; Šisler 2008), gender (Jansz and Martis 2007) and sexuality (Shaw 2009) in examining how videogames can reinforce and legitimise hegemonic stereotypes, norms and ideologies. In particular, as I will discuss later in more detail, there has been a focus on the Orientalist representations found in military-themed videogames produced after 9/11 (e.g. Bos 2018b; Power 2007; Šisler 2008). There has also been work attending to the geographies of the production and consumption of videogames (Ash 2010, 2012a; Johns 2006), with studies on how videogames have become an aspect of people’s everyday lives across generations (e.g. Quandt et al. 2009; Valentine and Holloway 2001, 2002). Moreover, research has explored the development of social spaces and communities in the ‘virtual worlds’ of massively multiplayer online games (MMOs), including *World of Warcraft* (WOW) (Krzywinska 2006), *EverQuest* (Taylor 2006) and *Club Penguin* (Marsh 2010). Equally, it has discussed how videogaming has reorganised a number of ‘real-world’ social and cultural spaces (Aber 2008; Flynn 2003; Livingstone 2007). Additionally, this work parallels much broader concerns in digital/virtual geographies and children’s geographies on the so-called ‘digital divide’ (see Kinsley 2013 for a review of the literature on ‘online geographies’). Altogether then, as will be further discussed later in this thesis, videogames have become socially embedded in everyday life across a number of spaces (see Gosling and Crawford 2011).

2.4.2 Videogaming as a Practice

Work from within geography that has attended to videogaming as a cultural practice has been significantly shaped by ideas central to both post-phenomenology and non-representational

theory (NRT) that are associated with the wider 'rematerialisation' of cultural geography. As Ash and Gallacher (2011) write, scholars have started to look past the binary of 'actual' or 'real' spaces of everyday life and the 'virtual' spaces of videogames that has been echoed in many studies. Pertinently, Thrift (2003, 2004a, 2004b) has identified practices of videogaming as being part of a wider reorganisation of what he calls the 'technical unconscious', describing how increasingly sophisticated technological forms change the ways in which we think about, experience and interact with space and time. Following this line of thinking, several scholars have subsequently looked at the affectual nature of videogames and in doing so, have shed light on the various ways in which videogames work to shape player's capacities (Gee 2008; Millington 2009; Paterson 2006). For instance, Paterson (2006) has examined how haptic devices like console controllers can generate 'force feedback' (i.e. vibrations) and mechanically reproduce a sense of touch through players' interactions with audio-visual images when videogaming. Likewise, Gee (2008) has used videogaming to illustrate how the 'projective stance' a type of embodied thinking where we are both imposed on by the character we play and impose ourselves on that character, is a characteristic of many video games, and in fact everyday life. Furthermore, Millington (2009) with reference to Foucauldian notions of governmentality, looks at the *Nintendo Wii* and how through 'active' technologies it stimulates dynamic somatic movements from its players, thereby exerting a disciplinary force on the players' bodies. While more recently, Ash (2013) has explored how the environments of first-person shooters are designed in ways that greatly increase the potential for contingent and sudden encounters to cultivate a sense of captivation in its players. As he further writes, players gain a kind of 'affective vulnerability' in becoming more attuned to the game and developing the somatic and sensory skills that are involved in gameplay. Thus, as Ash and Gallacher (2011) write, different videogames shape player's capacities in different ways - an important line of thought that this research will explore further in considering how Battle Royale videogames and streams configure player's capacities and subjectivities.

Furthermore, game scholars and geographers alike have explored the ways in which the experience of gameplay is shaped through the relations between technologies and players (Ash 2012b; Bos 2018b; Egliston 2019a, 2019b). As part of this work, scholars have deployed different theorisations of the concept of 'technicity', i.e. a mode by which technical objects exist in the world, to better understand how player's practices and sensitivities are organised

by the various technologies involved in gameplay (see Crogan and Kennedy 2009). For instance, Ash (2012b) employs the concept of technicity to look at how the spatiotemporal perception of players is shaped by the habitual development of skill in the fighting videogame *Street Fighter IV* (SF IV). Here Ash illustrates how SF IV players gain the capability to better respond to events within very small temporal windows by learning the individual frames of the animations for combination attacks and engaging in constant conscious practice. In a similar vein, Egliston (2019a, 2019b) analyses the ways in which players' skills and practices are conditioned by spectating esports (electronic sport) broadcasts - in both analyses here, this is the popular, multiplayer online battle arena game *Defense of the Ancients 2* (*DOTA 2*). In this first analysis, Egliston (2019a) explores how players 'learn' the game via the recorded gameplay of experts and how the development of technicities can also negatively impact the experience of its play as a skilful contest, such as by leading to the homogenisation of playstyle. While in his second analysis, Egliston (2019b) focuses on how moments of bodily tension emerge as spectators of *DOTA 2* attempt to imitate strategies and techniques derived from e-sports matches in their own play, with players for example panicking and being anxious when mobilising high-level strategies. Crucially, both of Egliston's articles are instructive of the 'antagonistic relations' or negative embodiments of frustration and anger that can emerge through practices of videogaming. To summarise, this scholarship has provided greater insights into the material and affective dimensions of videogaming, and in doing so also offered a better understanding of the complex relations produced between humans and technologies through gameplay.

2.5 Videogames, War and the MIME-complex

Across the social sciences significant attention has been paid to how the media and the entertainment industry represent militaries and their activities in popular culture (e.g. Debrix 2007; Stahl 2010; Woodward et al. 2009). Usefully, Thussu and Freedman (2003) identify and outline three different roles the media has conducted in communicating conflict. The first is that of the critical observer or watchdog, in which the media takes an adversarial role. The second is the role of publicist, where the media works to legitimise and promote government perspectives and actions. While the third model of communicating conflict, proposes that the military and media networks have converged to such an extent that media is now itself co-constitutive of the 'battlespace' and thereby the primary means through which humanity

experiences war. This convergence is indicative of the affective 'landscape' termed the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment complex (MIME) complex (der Derian 2009; Dittmer and Gray 2019; Stahl 2010). The MIME-network is an evolution and development, of what President Eisenhower in his final address in 1961 coined the military-industrial complex, describing the institutional relationships of militarism among those actors involved in establishing the US's first peacetime military. As der Derian (2009) discusses however, the MIME network has since extended further to incorporate the entertainment and media industries, as the US has sought to acquire both the technical capabilities and the ethical acceptance for military action. In this way as der Derian (2009: vii) comments it has subsequently "seamlessly merge[d] the production, representation and execution of war". Stahl (2010) extends on der Derian's work, in discussing how war had first been presented and mediated as a spectacle to citizens before the events of 9/11, here identifying three key tropes. First, there is the trope of "clean war" in which war is presented as hygienic by masking the costs of war, thereby maximising its capacity for consumption by audiences. The second trope is that of "techno-fetishism" wherein high-tech weaponry is celebrated and venerated at the expense of its victims in order to legitimise war. The third trope is the "support-the-troops" discourse, which has been used to suppress debate by equating the opposition of war as not supporting soldiers. However, as Stahl (2010) explains, following the events of 9/11 and continued evolution of the MIME complex, 'spectacular war' has shifted to 'interactive war' in which citizens are invited to become active participants through media, exemplified by military-themed videogames, which have enabled citizens to virtually play and experience war.

Subsequently, a number of scholars from within and outside of political geography have become increasingly attentive to the close ties between the US military and the videogame industry that exist as part of the MIME network (Dittmer and Bos 2019; see der Derian 2009; also see Huntemann and Payne 2010). Of particular note here is the videogame *America's Army* (AA), which as many scholars have discussed was produced by the US military for training and recruitment purposes, i.e. as a form of 'militainment' (e.g. Robinson 2012; Salter 2011; Stahl 2006). Here academics have critiqued AA in two ways; firstly for emulating and enforcing the US Army's procedures, and secondly for acting as a form of propaganda by how it engenders support for both the US military and military interventions (Bogost 2007; Nichols 2010; Nieborg 2010; Power 2007). Scholars have thereby come to understand AA and other

military-themed videogames (commonly first-person shooters) as contributing to the militarisation of everyday life, in blurring the boundaries between both 'virtual' and 'real' warfare, and 'the citizen' and 'the soldier' (e.g. King and Leonard 2010; Power 2007; Shaw 2010; Stahl 2006, 2010). Many of these arguments have their basis in the work of post-structural philosophers, like Jean Baudrillard and Paul Virilio, who have controversially claimed that war most often takes place in the hyperreal or virtual, and that war-making itself is increasingly virtual and hyperreal, which in turn have been critiqued for ignoring the material basis for war and its material effects (see Luke and Ó Tuathail 2000). Indeed, to take a feminist geopolitical perspective it is important to think about the materialities of the human (body) in such analyses. As such, this thesis attends to the material effects on the human bodies involved in (ludic) war in as 'spectacular war' shifts to 'interactive war' through videogaming and live-streaming.

As Shaw and Warf (2009) argue, it is critical that scholars to attend to the complex and often problematic ways in which the affective and representational aspects of videogames may resonate with players. Pertinently, in considering the more-than-representational aspects of military-themed videogames, James Ash (2009, 2010, 2013) has studied how FPSs are designed in particular ways by their producers to enable certain geopolitical experiences and affects. In a similar vein, Smicker (2010) has noted how in working to normalise militarism, these games are paradoxically designed to be 'realistic' in their depictions of war, while also rendering invisible the true extent of this violence to avoid generating the negative affective state that would result from 'too much representation'. While even more recently, Bos (2018b) has studied how the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* series both offers an anticipatory form of visuality in which playing war is a highly embodied and affective experience, as well as articulates a contemporary geopolitical imagination wherein conflict occurs in distant and familiar locations. Therefore, as Bos argues, this series of games works to legitimise military violence 'over there' and justify the increased militarisation of Western cities through dystopic depictions of 'threatened' Western landscapes. Ultimately then, a great deal of research supports the arguments that videogames reproduce certain hegemonic geopolitical imaginaries and sensibilities and are involved in the militarisation of everyday life.

Nevertheless, a number of academics have challenged these arguments in seeking to assess whether military-themed videogames actually contribute to the militarisation of society, and if so to what extent (e.g. Hitchens et al. 2014; Robinson 2012; Schulzke 2013b). For instance, Schulzke (2013b) has rebuked existing research for making weak assumptions about the harmful impacts of military games on civil society, because of its focus on the relationship between the military and the videogame industry. While noting that this does not necessarily mean military gaming is not unproblematic, especially as these games become more technologically sophisticated, Schulzke (2013b: 100) asserts that “showing this connection does not tell us what ideological message the games promote, or [how] military games are actually experienced”. Meanwhile, as Hitchens et al. (2014) discuss, FPSs encompass a diverse range of antagonists including criminals, aliens and zombies, with a decrease in the number of games based on Islamic extremists. This in turn correlates with a decline in public support for the ‘War on Terror’, thereby leading Hitchens et al. (2014: 23) to surmise that “the extent to which video war games can militarize society is negotiated as much by the context of play as it is by the perceived desire for this sort of fantasy enrichment”. To put it another way, it is a range of societal forces - here a mixture of war weariness and the public being misled by the state over WMD’s in Iraq - and not just military propaganda that determines the popularity and content of FPSs. Nevertheless, it is important to note here that in the current geopolitical climate the figure of ‘the zombie’ has come to, among other things, embody the Islamist terrorist (Saunders 2012), exemplifying how geopolitics is deeply entangled in everyday life. In fact, as I come to argue further in the next section, there needs to be further consideration of the everyday contexts in which ludic war takes place.

2.5.1 Military-themed Videogames in Everyday Life

In exploring the extent to which military-themed videogames are implicated in the militarisation of society, scholars have also conducted empirical work with gamers. For instance, Huntemann (2010) finds that players did not wholly reject or accept the ideology about militarism embedded in these games and were equally critical and sceptical about US foreign policy and military intervention. Rather, she argues that by enabling players to participate in simplified, sanitised fantasies of war, these games act as a therapeutic tool for them to temporarily deal with their fears around terrorism. Likewise, a study by Penney (2010) on the influence of war-themed videogames finds that international players who were critical

of American foreign policy appreciated how World War 2 was depicted as a conflict that involved multilateral co-operation in *Call of Duty*. Subsequently, Penney (2010: 204) claims that “these games function as a soft sell of hard power” reasoning that as this militarisation occurs at the level of popular culture it enables audiences to form a variety of interpretations. While in a more recent study, Robinson (2016) has explored the controversies surrounding *Medal of Honor*, in which players would have been able to play as both American forces and the Taliban, and *Medal of Honor: Warfighter*, where the game linked to websites selling real-life weapons. In doing so, he illuminates how ‘excessive’ celebrations of militarism can result in criticism and active opposition among the media, politicians and even the players themselves. Thus, as Robinson argues, this suggests limits to society’s compliance in militarism and a continuing capacity to critique militaristic popular culture.

Equally, scholars have studied how videogames can be used to contest and challenge the militarisation and hegemonic geopolitical discourse, be it in the form of critical military games, as an arena for social protest or as a result of game modifications (see Robinson 2012). For instance, Power (2007) has pointed to how Islamic militants have modified existing videogames and produced their own videogames as part of a propaganda campaign against the USA. These games reverse the discourses found in mainstream games by depicting US troops as the enemies and portraying Islamic radicals as heroes. Payne (2014) has analysed how the videogame *Spec Ops: The Line* acts as a critique of ‘militainment’ by deconstructing and inverting the ‘pleasurable’ power fantasies that you play in mainstream shooters. Similarly, Higgin (2010) has examined the unconventional ways through which *Metal Gear Solid 2* (MSG2) works to subvert the MIME-network. Specifically, he discusses how while on the surface the MSG2 appears to glorify violence, in fact it is a critique of the systems of biopolitical and technological control that encompass the post-modern military, while also reflecting the increasingly ludic nature of our everyday lives. While Chan (2010) examines how the controversial protest project *Dead-in-Iraq*, in which a performance artist playing AA drops down his virtual gun and lists dead American soldiers, thereby drawing attention to the human cost of war. Here, Chan considers how cultural jamming in virtual spaces like in *Dead-In-Iraq* is an effective form of political resistance together with other forms of protest. Nevertheless, as Schulzke (2013a) crucially points out, critical themes around war, terrorism and the military, whether meant intentionally or not can be found in a number of mainstream videogames.

Thus, just as Robinson (2012) surmises, while the persuasive power of videogames has predominantly been used to reinforce dominant ideologies it can also challenge these hegemonic discourses.

Yet, little attention has been paid to the actual event of playing war in gamers' everyday lives. Indeed, as Payne (2010: 208 – italics in original) argues, “[t]he *where* and the *how* must be considered alongside the *what* of gameplay, as well as its connection to culturally dominant symbolic regimes”. Similarly, as Robinson (2016: 270) remarks in calling for a better understanding of the affects that military videogames have on their audiences, “how they are affected, the messages players internalise, and the extent to which military games impact on values are surprisingly understudied”. I would agree with both Payne and Robinson here, noting that while recent research has accounted for their affective qualities, much of the literature still tends to analyse these games as ‘texts’ in relation to the MIME-complex and militaristic discourses rather than in their everyday contexts; i.e. the who, the what, the where, the how and the why. By ignoring the wider context of their play, which is ambiguous in nature, analyses thereby reproduce the fundamentalist conceptualisation of resistance in reductively thinking of videogames as cultural artefacts that can either support or contest the militarisation of everyday life. Or to refer back to an earlier point, these analyses reaffirm Glynn and Cupples’ (2015: 273) claim that “a residual masculinism seems to persist” in popular geopolitics. Furthermore, it exemplifies the rather reductive conceptualisation of popular culture as a discrete ‘thing’ within academia (see Dittmer 2015a). While, as Bos (2018b) argues, there is a danger for player-centric research to provide a reductionist understanding of the gaming situation. In seeking to avoid reproducing these various problematic tendencies within these bodies of scholarship, this research subsequently turns to notions of assemblage and deploys ethnographic methods to explore how the young people involved in playing and the live-streaming of Battle Royale videogames as part of their everyday lives, are co-constitutive of geopolitics. However, before outlining this methodological approach, the final section of this chapter turns to notions of “Empire”, and how Battle Royale videogames and streams are instructive of processes of “Empire”.

2.6 “Empire” and Videogames

Informed by post-structuralist thinking, aptly ideas of Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, Hardt and Negri (2004: 40) theorise “Empire” as the transition from a modern phenomenon of imperialism centred on individual nation-states to a post-modern “globalized biopolitical machine”. More specifically, they outline how “Empire” is governance by global capitalism, an emerging planetary regime in which economic, administrative, military and communicative components combine to create a permanent, timeless and vital system of networked power. Here they turn to how the capital has become increasingly global both in its geographic reach and its social scope as it subsumes everything under its biopolitical regime. These processes of “Empire” result in the banalisation of war, in which war has become a permanent social condition and so embedded into the culture of everyday life, and where “the enemy” is represented as “an absolute threat to the ethical order” and “reduced to an object of routine police repression” (Hardt and Negri 2000: 13). Significantly, they point to the hegemony of immaterial labour, i.e. the work involved in producing the informational, cultural or affective element of a commodity, as “Empire” reconfigures both systems of production and consumption in/for global capitalism. As they elucidate, immaterial labour blurs the lines between work and leisure, creating a continuum of productivity and exploitability that is “beyond measure” (Hardt and Negri 2000: 356). Another important idea here is that of the multitude, which Hardt and Negri (2000, 2004) refer to as the social force that acts as both the motor and antagonist to “Empire”, working within and against it. They define this multitudinous potential in three different but connected ways. Firstly, they point to how it enables new forms of subjectivity, from emergent individual and collective human capacities involved in processes of global capital yet, this multitudinous subjectivity is also potentially subversive because such capacities exceed the purposes to which “Empire” uses to confine them. Secondly, they recognise a variety of new social movements opposing global capitalism, with multiple insurgencies centred on issues of the environment, citizenship status and media among many others. Thirdly, they argue the multitude offers a capacity to form a political project to not just resist the workings of global capital, but develop, protect and propose alternatives to “Empire”, one they sketch as providing global citizenship, freedoms and democracy. Hardt and Negri conclude that when all three of these three dimensions coalesce, a post-capitalist future beyond “Empire” opens up.

Building on Hardt and Negri (2000, 2004), Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009) explore how videogames are a paradigmatic media of “Empire”, symbolising its two-pronged apparatus of the military and the market, as either forms of militainment, such as the military-themed first person shooter *America’s Army* or ludocapitalism, like the online mass multiplayer simulation game *Second Life*. They discuss how these games work to reproduce “Empire”’s twin vital subjectivities of the ‘worker-consumer’ and the ‘soldier-citizen’, with *Second Life* facilitating global capital as a site of online shopping, social networking and digital labour, and as noted previously AA being used both as a medium that reproduces hegemonic, militaristic discourses and a tool for recruitment to the US military. Significantly, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter bring attention to how in over 50 years videogaming has become an extensive techno-cultural-commercial nexus, with games becoming increasingly integrated and entangled with film, music and other media as part of a convergent entertainment complex, as well as a part of many people’s lives from across the world. In doing so, they accentuate how the medium is integral to and expressive of “Empire”, from its roots in the MIME-complex, how it has facilitated immaterial labour in tandem with the development of digital technology and networked communication, how it blurs the lines between work and play and how it produces neo-liberal subjectivities. Likewise, they map the various violent intersections between race, gender, class and processes of global capital. For instance, there are chapters on Chinese racism and ‘gold-farming’ labour in *World of Warcraft*; Anti-Hispanic and anti-Black racism in *Grand Theft Auto*’s representation of US cities; and perhaps most pertinently here, xenophobia, Islamophobia and the banalisation of war in military-themed shooters such as *Full Spectrum Warrior*. Lastly, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter refer to and speculate on the multitudinous potential of videogames and contemporary video game culture. Here they recognise several forms of counterplay, acts of contestation within and against the ideologies of individual games of “Empire”, such as the emergence of critical content in a few mainstream games, tactical games designed by activists to disseminate radical social critique and self-organised worlds of players producing game content independently of commercial studios. Thus, they highlight the emancipatory potentials of videogames in enabling this post-capitalist future dreamt by Hardt and Negri. This has parallels with work in geographical scholarship that attends to the ways in which play is transformative and has the potential to enable alternative, geopolitical imaginings - ideas I explore further in the next chapter.

2.6.1 “Empire” and Battle Royale Videogames and Streams in the Present Day

Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter (2020) have more recently developed these ideas further in response to critiques and the events that have taken place since writing “Games of Empire” such as the period of austerity following the financial crisis, the rise of right-wing populism and neo-fascism in politics, and the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, they emphasise the subsumption of gaming by capital and highly reactionary tendencies of the multitude, pointing to the intensifying concentration of ownership, escalating micro-commodification of the game industry and the multiple intersectional inequalities and antagonisms that divide both the production and consumption of games. Namely, they highlight the ownership of Twitch by Amazon as an exemplar of gaming’s further assimilation into the logics of capital through platformisation. As Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter elucidate, such processes are instructive of “Empire”, as while the spread of platforms for the production, distribution and consumption of games is articulated in rhetorics of democratisation, it simultaneously works to strengthen the hegemony of Big Tech, with games transformed into a more exploitative, service-based model. Pertinently, as they further write, these processes of platformisation have in turn led to reconfiguration of playbour, where Twitch streamers conduct precarious, strenuous and insecure digital labour to extract income, as well as the creation of games like *Fortnite* as a platform or ‘advertising expo’ for various cultural commodities. Furthermore, they discuss the deeply reactionary side of gaming culture in relation to Gamergate¹ and the rise of the alt-right in digital spaces, with a widening and increasingly heterogeneous player population has triggered vitriol from the supposed hegemonic, misogynistic and racist majority of ‘gamers’ – with Gamergate subject to critical analysis within by several scholars (see for example Chess and Shaw 2015; Dowling et al. 2020; Gray et al. 2017; Massanari 2017; Salter 2018) as well as the media for how it illustrated the complex and problematic relations between gender and technology. This research then will consider these ongoing developments within the gaming industry and gaming culture in exploring how Battle Royale videogames and streams animate and destabilise “Empire”.

¹ Gamergate was a loosely organised misogynistic online harassment campaign by right-wing groups who fought in a culture war against feminism, diversity, and progressivism in video game culture

Subsequently, this research builds on Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter (2009, 2021) in examining how military-themed Battle Royale games such as *Call of Duty: Warzone*, and even those that are non-military themed such as *Fortnite*, act as forms of both militainment and ludocapitalism. Moreover, in recognition of processes of platformisation, it will attend to the ways in which Twitch streaming (of these games) extends even further on these processes of “Empire”. As such, it will extend on the aforementioned scholarship on ‘militainment’ within geography and the social sciences (e.g. Robinson 2012; Salter 2011; Stahl 2006) but also turn to how processes of militarisation, racialisation and gendering that are inherent to “Empire”, are bolstered, contested and negotiated through the everyday practices of young gamers and streamers. Nevertheless, as Boluk and LeMieux (2017: 4) reason, it is important to recognise the many practices and material incoherencies that have already emerged in videogaming, especially as everyday life becomes increasingly configured through digital technology. Here they draw attention to how through an array of ‘meta-gaming’ practices, including playing, competing, streaming, spectating and cheating, videogames as a mass medium and cultural commodity become transformed into instruments, equipment, tools and toys that then purposefully or incidentally intercede in the affective and political economies of the same technologies that have enabled the privatisation of play. Thus, there will be a consideration of the multitudinous potential of Battle Royale videogames and live-streams as they work within and against “Empire”, through the lens of everyday life.

This thesis also will consider the complex relations between masculinity and videogaming. As Taylor and Voorhees (2018: 3) discuss, while pointing to the ways in which videogames are instructive of “Empire”, there is a need for scholars to attend to the “co-constitutive relations between gaming, masculinities, and the wider cultural and political landscapes in which games and their players move”. Specifically here, they note the history of geek culture, in terms of how it has marginalised women and people of colour as well as how it shares close ties with gaming, computing and the military-industrial complex (see also Salter and Blodgett 2017). Moreover they turn to the complex, mutual relations between markedly misogynistic elements of geek culture and how reactionaries found potent political agency first through Gamergate and then later in their adulating support of President Trump and his espousal of a right-wing, nativist politics, here recognising the significance of gaming as key site for the reconfiguration of understandings of masculinity. As such, this research will attend to how

various masculinities are shaped, performed and transformed through the playing and streaming of Battle Royale videogames, shedding more light on “Empire” and its gendered dimensions, and as will be highlighted further in the next chapter, how this has led to production of certain political and economic subjectivities.

Furthermore, this thesis will build on research in game studies and cultural geographies on videogaming, focusing on notions of the attention economy and how the medium has become socially embedded in young people’s everyday lives, in relation to the all-encompassing bio-political regime of “Empire”. In doing so, this research will illuminate the diversity of violence(s) that may emerge through the playing and streaming of ludic war in Battle Royale videogames. Significantly, this will be done in a way that avoids perpetuating the masculinist, disembodied and distanced gaze of both classical, and also some critical geopolitical scholarship (Hyndman 2001; Massaro and Williams 2013). Indeed, despite the increasing engagement with notions of affect and embodiment in popular geopolitical scholarship, especially in relation to military-themed videogames, popular culture is still often analysed through a masculine lens (Glynn and Cupples 2015). Specifically, I contend that this enduring masculism can be seen in the lack of attention paid to the actual event of playing war in young gamers’ everyday lives, and the wider cultural, social and political landscapes in which they inhabit, encounter and negotiate on a daily basis. As such the next chapter moves towards establishing a grounded, assemblage-based approach towards the study of ludic war in Battle Royale games and streams.

2.7 Concluding Remarks

This chapter has outlined how geographers and other social scientists have attended to the ambiguous notions of geopolitics, violence and play and the relations between these that emerge through everyday life, such as through practices of videogaming. In considering geopolitics, it has looked at how scholarship has moved away from discourse to focus on how people encounter and negotiate geopolitics in their everyday lives” (Dittmer and Gray 2010). In reviewing an array of literature on violence, this chapter has considered how it is an ambiguous term, its intersections with hazy notions of war and peace, its relations to processes of imperialism and militarisation, as well as how it exists in various forms across

multiple scales. While in discussing play, in following Woodyer (2012) this chapter has attended to its everyday character, its transformative potentials and how it exceeds representation and 'rationality', with a focus on the social and cultural geographies of children's play. This chapter then outlined videogames as a complex, cultural medium that has become embedded in everyday life and videogaming as a practice in which complex relations are produced between humans and technologies. Specifically, in engaging with the relations between violence, geopolitics and play through videogames, this chapter has critically reviewed the extent to which military-themed first-person shooters have contributed to the militarisation of society, arguing that there is a need for further research into their play in the context of everyday life. Finally, in bringing this altogether this chapter has explored the ways in which videogames are the paradigmatic media of "Empire". Here I contend that research on military-themed videogames where scholars have engaged with ludic war, have tended to emphasise the effects of digital military violence in relation to the MIME-complex, and thus fails to recognise how such games are productive of a multiplicity of violence(s) that are inherent to "Empire". As I turn to in the following chapter, to gain a better understand these ambiguous notions of geopolitics, violence and play necessitates an assemblage ethnography approach (Ghoddousi and Page 2020), one that allows us to analyse the contingent ways in which young gamers and an array of actants, spaces and places, involved in the videogaming and live-streaming of Battle Royale videogames emerge in complex, contingent arrangements..

Chapter 3: Towards Assemblage Ethnography

The previous chapter charted the scholarship on geopolitics, violence and (game)play, and illuminated how this research will move these bodies of work forward in exploring their ambiguous, everyday and relational qualities as these phenomena emerge through processes of Hardt and Negri's "Empire". This chapter discusses the various theoretical, conceptual and methodological understandings of assemblage and ethnography that have emerged in geography and the wider social sciences and humanities, before setting out how assemblage ethnography (Ghoddousi and Page 2020) can be used to explore these themes of geopolitics, play and violence in researching the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and live-streams. To start with, this chapter outlines the ways in which work in geography and other disciplines have engaged with assemblage, and in particular the theoretical framings of Deleuze and Guattari. The next section reviews how political geographers and others have engaged with assemblage and the 'more-than-human' in the wake of the material and relational turns within the social sciences and humanities. Here it turns to outlining how the political geographer Jason Dittmer has drawn on Deleuze and Guattari, DeLanda's assemblage theory, complexity theory and Protevi's bodies politic, in developing a geopolitical approach towards assemblage. After then charting critiques of the ethics and politics of doing assemblage-as-ethos, this chapter turns to the value of Page and Ghoddousi's (2020) approach of assemblage ethnography as a way of analysing, but also intervening in the emergent politics of socio-material-affective assemblages. In examining how ethnographic methods have been used to study play and humour, this chapter returns to Dittmer's work on assemblage and his ethnographic studies of geopolitics and humour in the simulation games *Model United Nations* and *Statecraft*, as well as ethnographic studies of 'war toys' within ludic geopolitics. The penultimate section of this chapter focuses on how game studies has used assemblage in exploring the complex, relational qualities of videogaming, before specifically turning to how ethnographic studies by Payne (2010) and Bos (2018a) have shed light on some of the ways in which (military-themed) videogaming actually 'plays out' in everyday life. Finally, this chapter turns to notions of assemblage in relation to "Empire" and the multitude, critically examining the ways in which videogames are productive of a variety of subjectivities inherent to "Empire", and how through using assemblage ethnography to study Battle Royale videogames and Twitch streams, this thesis makes several contributions to scholarship.

3.1 Assemblage Thinking

In the face of the 'relational' turn and ongoing development of socio-spatial theory, assemblage thinking has become more ubiquitous across the social sciences and humanities as a set of approaches attending to the complexity, (in)stability and emergence of social phenomena (Marcus and Saka, 2006; Venn 2006). As Anderson and McFarlane (2011: 124) write, assemblage is "part of a more general reconstitution of the social that seeks to blur divisions of social-material, near-far and structure-agency". However, rather than there being a singular approach to assemblage, it has been thought of and used in a multiplicity of ways in geographical scholarship. For instance, Robbins and Marks (2009) have suggested that in recent socio-material geography, there are at least four different ways of 'thinking assemblage'. First is the 'symmetrical assemblage', which as theorised by Bruno Latour, entails that all elements in an assemblage shape its dynamics and are active in the outcome. This theorisation revolves around the quasi-objects that straddle nature/society binaries like water, which are socially constructed as resources. but as natural elements also exceed volitional control due to their agency and materiality. Subsequently, explanations treat the human and non-human in parallel to illuminate the power relations behind asymmetric understandings of such phenomena to then provide greater insights into the socio-material world. The second theorisation is that of the 'intimate assemblage', which has emerged from the work of the feminist scholar Donna Haraway. This approach traces how individuals and species are mutually remade through their social relations, considers their possibilities and tries to imagine other ways of becoming in the world. In doing so, it looks to produce reflexive connections in observers about how we think of ourselves as human or more-than human. The third theorisation is defined as the 'metabolic assemblage', which derives from Marxist theory and draws attention to the metabolic flow that exists between nature and society and circulates through labour. This type of assemblage explores how exploitative relationships between human and non-human elements are (re)configured through processes of capitalism. The fourth theorisation is the genealogical assemblage, a technique in which contemporary conditions and knowledges are shown to be the result of associations between a range of actors that collectively stabilise or destabilise epistemes. This type of assemblage can be used as a tool for critical decision-making around issues relating to medicine, technology and environmental change. As Robbins and Marks (2009) conclude, notions of assemblage vary in

both their modes of explanation and academic audiences, but overlap significantly through their common interest in 'more-than-human' matters and in sharing an ethos of experimentation. As will be discussed in further detail later, this research takes forward this interest in the 'more-than-human' and experimental ethos through using a range of methods in an innovative methodological approach.

Nevertheless, many popular theorisations of assemblage used in geographical research are associated with the work of Gilles Deleuze and his main collaborator Felix Guattari. As Marcus and Saka (2006) suggest, the popularity of assemblage may in part stem from the continuing fascination with the language used by the two philosophers. This assertion may have an element of truth to it as in rather evocative prose, Deleuze (in Deleuze and Parnet 1977: 69, in Müller 2015a: 28) has defined assemblage as follows:

“It is a multiplicity which is made up of many heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them across ages, sexes and reigns – different natures. Thus, the assemblage’s only unity is that of co-functioning: it is a symbiosis, a ‘sympathy’. It is never filiations which are important but alliances, alloys; these are not successions, lines of descent, but contagions, epidemics, the wind.”

To put it more simply, assemblage is a mode of ordering a group of heterogeneous entities so that they work together in a contingent arrangement. Importantly, however, as Phillips (2006) remarks, Deleuze and Guattari did not use the term assemblage in a philosophical sense. Instead, the two philosophers referred to 'assemblage' as a provisional analytical tool, with its usage in academia in fact being based on an approximate translation of the French word 'agencement' (Müller 2015a; Phillips 2006). Unlike the term 'assemblage' which shares similar meanings in both English and French, the expression 'agencement' is more comparable to the English words 'arrangement', 'fitting' and 'fixing' in describing the process of arranging together a set of heterogeneous elements. It is imperative then to recognise the specific connections that the term agencement has with event, becoming and sense when talking about assemblage.

3.1.1 Assemblage and Geography

Anderson and McFarlane (2011) explain how assemblage has been done in three different but overlapping ways within geographical scholarship. Firstly, assemblage has been used as a broad descriptor, synonymous with other relational terms like network and system to denote the coming together of disparate actors in a provisional formation. As Anderson and McFarlane (2011: 125) note however, if assemblage is used as a descriptor too liberally, there is a “risk that an emphasis on form replaces formation, assemblage as noun replaces assemblage as verb” meaning that it loses the distinct connotations it has with agencement and processes of “co-functioning”. More exact and strict deployments of assemblage as a descriptor can be seen from research in urban geography done by Swyngedouw (2006) and Allen and Cochrane (2007). Here Swyngedouw (2006) has mobilised notions of ‘circulation’ and ‘metabolism’ together with Haraway’s ideas of the ‘cyborg’ and ‘hybridity’ in attending to how the urbanisation of nature occurs through an array of complex socio-environmental processes. Allen and Cochrane (2007) have used assemblage to contest the notion that regions are fixed political spaces ordered by scale and instead through a relational approach explore how ‘regional assemblages’ - in their case Milton Keynes - emerge through a set of political actors and processes involved in governance. Both of these examples illustrate then, as Anderson and McFarlane (2011) argue, how assemblage can be used to describe specific geographies of formation.

Secondly, assemblage as a concept (at least under a Deleuzoguattarian schema) bares similarities to its use as a descriptor; especially in terms of the emphases it places on ‘agencement’ and the sense that assemblages are provisional contingent wholes. However, assemblage as a concept is distinct from seemingly similar terms like networks, with Deleuze and Guattari referring to the term ‘constellation’. To be precise, assemblage can be defined through several key characteristics. The first and arguably most significant feature of assemblage is the claim that there is an ‘exteriority of relations’ or “relations are external to their terms” (Anderson et al. 2012a: 172). This suggests that each individual element of an assemblage, like a person or an object, can be thought of as carrying a degree of autonomy from the relations between them (Müller 2015a). Furthermore, it means that relations cannot be reduced to their function and thus an individual component - which itself may also be an assemblage - may both have different interactions with, and be involved in a multiplicity of assemblages (Anderson et al. 2012a; DeLanda 2006; Dittmer 2017). Subsequently, it is not the

properties of constituent elements, but their indefinite capacities for interaction that enables us to understand the resultant assemblage. Therefore, in assemblage thinking, agency is distributed within an emergent assemblage and its individual autonomous components. This speaks back to the emergent, indeterminate nature of the processes that are involved in change, as conjured by Deleuze in his use of the words 'contagion' and 'sympathy' when defining assemblage.

Assemblages are also characterised as being productive, as they exist in a state of constantly becoming (thus reflecting their historical nature) and bring into being new 'stuff' like new behaviours, new actants or even new realities (Dittmer 2017; Müller 2015). This reflects another significant trait of assemblage in that they are marked by 'desire', a corporeal quality that describes how there is a potential in every system to self-organise and be productive. Likewise, assemblages are also by definition heterogeneous in nature, as any 'thing' can co-constitute an assemblage. Pertinently, as Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 25) explain:

“There is no longer a tripartite division between a field of reality (the world) and the field of representation (the book) and the field of subjectivity (the author). Rather, an assemblage establishes connections between certain multiplicities drawn from each of these orders.’

Subsequently, assemblage eschews the nature-culture divide and emphasises a new relational ontology where 'wholes' are mutually constituted through co-combinations of material objects and bodies, social representations and discourses, and subjective experiences, ideas and emotions (Bennett 2010; Robbins and Marks 2009; Muller 2015). Furthermore, assemblages are conceptualised as being organised through two different dimensions or axes (Anderson and McFarlane 2011; DeLanda 2006; Dittmer 2017; Müller 2015). The first axis of material/expressive specifies the variable roles in which an assemblage's components may take place. For example, a conversation consists of the 'material' content of the dialogue, but also 'expressive' elements like posture, dress, and facial gestures. Additionally, since each component has an unlimited capacity for interaction, they can exercise material and/or expressive roles in different assemblages. The second axis of (re)territorialisation/deterritorialisation highlights the provisional nature of assemblage, illustrating how components can by exercising different sets of capacities work to stabilise

and/or change the identity of assembled orders. To elucidate this dynamic describes how assemblages become more or less delineated, coherent, and homogeneous. For instance, a face-to-face conversation in a particular, bounded place like the pub is more territorialised than one that takes place at distance through communication technologies like computers and telephones. Moreover, it is through these processes that assemblages are constantly opening up what Deleuze refers to as 'lines of flight', a range of contingent, potential futures inherent to any moment that despite not being actualised, can be acted on in the present to increase their probability of happening (Anderson and McFarlane 2011; Dittmer 2013). Subsequently, as Anderson and McFarlane write, scholars have turned to assemblage as a concept and in particular the processes of (re)territorialisation and deterritorialisation to gain insights into social differences such as sexuality and race. For instance, Lim (2010) considers race and ethnicity as being both produced through, and practiced in, historically specific socio-material assemblages. In doing so, Lim frames a post-human, antiracist politics that is not focused on identity and/or resistance, but instead works to create different conditions for affect, thought and action. Thus, the concept of assemblage offers a way of understanding the organisation of bodies and the force of difference. As identified in the previous chapter, assemblage can therefore be used in understanding the gendering and racialising effects of "Empire" through Battle Royale videogames and streams.

Thirdly, and straddling across its use as both a descriptor and a concept, assemblage has also been used to suggest a particular ethos of engagement or 'experimental condition' that embraces difference, heterogeneity and indeterminacy in attending to the social in formation (Anderson and McFarlane 2011; Anderson et al. 2012a). However, it does not mean to invoke the classical connotations of the word experiment, i.e. the testing of a pre-existing hypothesis under controlled conditions. Rather it refers to a researcher being experimental in terms of purposefully being open to the complexity and ambiguous nature of assemblages, using methodological and presentational practices such as montage, thick description, stories and performative methods. For instance, Swanton (2010) through a montage of encounters with taxis and highly-customised and modified cars in Keighley, West Yorkshire explores how processes of social differentiation are performed on the road in 'racialised' encounters. Specifically, Swanton recognises race as a technology of differentiation that is employed in moments of encounter, contributing to what he terms the 'new racism of assemblages', which

describes how loose racial summaries circulate across bodies, things and spaces engender dispositions and provoke certain actions. Thus, crucially, Swanton demonstrates how considering assemblage as an ethos of engagement enables scholars to be attentive to processes of agencement and the often-unclear practices of composition.

3.1.2 Thinking and Doing Assemblage in Geography

Even so, as McFarlane and Anderson (2011) remark, there are many commonalities in the use of assemblage as a descriptor, concept and an ethos of engagement. For all three, it works as a term for unity across difference, thinks relationally in attending to the agency of both whole assemblages and their components, focuses on the continuous tension of formation and form and grapples with the uncertain, non-linear and contingent nature of change in various geographies. Nevertheless, scholars have encountered assemblage in different ways, drawing from and linking with the writings of several scholars. For instance, Greenhough (2011) uses the example of a proposal to turn Iceland into the ideal genetic laboratory and takes insights from Deleuze and Guattari, Actor Network Theory (ANT), and Donna Haraway to offer a tripartite analysis of the ways in which spatialisations of disease emerge in assemblage. Here she discusses how all three approaches have different emphases as they operate across differing spatial and temporal registers. To be exact, Deleuze and Guattari focus on what might potentially be; ANT attends to the processes by which worlds have already been actualised (with an explicit political concern as to how things come to matter); and Haraway is concerned with the 'response-abilities' that might arise from and be necessitated by socio-material relations. Featherstone (2011) looks to bring Stuart Hall's idea of articulation, i.e. the notion that something has to be made to mean and is always made to mean differently in various contexts, into a dialogue with assemblage thinking. In doing so, he explores how the strong emphasis on 'relational processuality' found in assemblage thinking enables a reworking of articulation. He reasons, "Following the co-constitution of trajectories and practices of articulation offers resources for thinking about the emergence of political possibility and agency" (Featherstone 2011: 142). Ultimately, as McFarlane and Anderson (2011) surmise, there are different ways of doing assemblage, as shown by how scholars have engaged with issues around ontological diversity, formation, the non-relational, newness and method and also linked the term to a range of problems, theories, sites and objectives.

McFarlane and Anderson (2011: 164) maintain a positive view of this diversity in assemblage thinking, arguing “[w]hat emerges is an ethic of theory-as-assemblage, i.e. as a constellation of singularities that holds together through difference rather than in spite of it, and that cultivates a provocative and fertile common ground”. Nevertheless, later as Anderson et al. (2012b) write, there is still a need for more dialogue around how to consider materialism, realism and politics in assemblage thinking. One such debate is around the return to realist ontologies, with the more explicit realisms of theorists such as Manuel DeLanda and Graham Harman contrasting the more implicit realisms of philosophers like Karen Barad and Jane Bennett. This debate on the relations between realism and materialism is a sticking point in (post-)human geography, with Allen (2012) simply asking “what kind of realism works for assemblage thinking?” in pushing for a more-than relational geography. Anderson et al. (2012b) respond by looking to cut a middle position between these implicit and explicit realisms, here arguing that assemblage thinking must be a type of realist materialism that accounts for a world of diverse entities. They elucidate further, reasoning that by emphasising the diverse capacities for interaction that exist throughout an assemblage and its component parts, as well as a principle of ‘emergent causality’, we can better attend to the durability, contingency and indifference of assembled orders.

Likewise, there are also concerns about the implications of understanding assemblage as a particular ethos of engagement for the politics of assemblage-based thinking. For instance, Greenhough (2012) problematises the ‘experimental condition’ that an ethos of assemblage entails, since in the context of research it is always an intervention. First, it implies that there is a need to attend to the agencement of the academic geographer by accommodating their agential capacities, limited empirical skills and orientations towards themselves, others and fieldwork/ academic practice. Second, comes the acknowledgement that research is a political and ethical act which will inevitably affect the assemblage under investigation, which raises questions for how we as scholars are responsible for and respond to our interventions. While Adey (2012) questions their mobilisation of the term ethos and what it actually means for geographical scholarship. To solve this quandary, Anderson et al. (2012b) provide an alternative understanding of ethos as a practical and contingent accomplishment, focusing attention on how assemblage is practised into action, as well as how assemblage thinking is

situated in, but not determined by historical and structural conditions. They also argue that as assemblage thinking maintains a particularist orientation to differentiation - with dynamic change emerging from an assemblage's capacities for interaction rather than its properties - it can subsequently account for the contingent nature of assembled orders and not produce generalisable explanations for such change. Subsequently, they consider assemblage as simultaneously an ethos, a set of conceptual approaches, and an array of methodological positions that focus on the qualities of composition and durability through difference. Thus, as Anderson et al. (2012b) conclude, assemblage gives both a better understanding of and in turn the means to attend to the immanent capacities of assembled orders and the potential trajectories for their re-composition. These debates and issues are important to bear in mind in the next sections as I attend to how assemblage thinking has influenced political geography, before focusing on Jason Dittmer's work on assemblage.

3.2 Assemblage, Political Geography and Geopolitics

There has been a clear interest in assemblage and the 'more-than representational' or 'more-than human' within political geography and critical geopolitics following the material and relational turns that have occurred within the social sciences and humanities. Although there is still much debate in critical geopolitics around discourse and materiality as charted in the previous chapter, (political) geographers have increasingly pushed beyond the representational to consider the links between affect and politics (Müller 2015b). For instance, Ó Tuathail (2003) has analysed how the US government drew on the "affective tsunami" emerging from 9/11, a somatic marker of resentment and desire, in garnering support for the invasion of Iraq. While from a feminist perspective, Pain et al. (2010) have studied the emotional experiences of young people in the UK and New Zealand in negotiating 'global' and 'everyday' fears. And in another example, Anderson (2010) has examined the anticipatory practices of security carried out by governments to prepare for imagined future events of terror. Furthermore, in building on this earlier work on affect, a number of political geographers have used ideas around different theorisations of assemblage in their work. Pertinently, Dittmer and Gray (2010) have briefly considered how through a relational ontology that affords quasi-agency to objects, 'the media' can be conceptualised as the effect of a techno-cultural assemblage. Political geographers have also drawn from Deleuze and Guattari and their work on assemblage to better understand the emergence of recent, geopolitical

events such as the election of Donald Trump and Brexit (e.g. Anderson and Wilson 2018; Dittmer and Bos 2019; Ingram 2017; Page and Dittmer 2016).

Likewise, a great deal of popular geopolitical scholarship has engaged with assemblage. For instance, Woon (2014) has examined how issues of terrorism, violence and peace are 'played out' in the everyday lives of Filipinos, by investigating their critical engagements with the representations of the 'War on Terror' in Mindanao found in the national newspaper, the *Philippines Daily Inquirer*. In doing so, Woon finds that readers' mediated encounters with and responses to the (geo)political conditions in Mindanao, were contingent on their vastly different experiences, positionalities and subjectivities, thus highlighting how audiences can actively reproduce and rework geopolitical knowledges and geographical imaginaries. In a similar vein, Thorogood (2020) through an assemblage-based framework explores how political satire in the popular animated cartoon *Archer* emerges in a complex production process that involves writers, audiences, animators and non-human animation technologies. In particular, they analyse how dissatisfied fans interpreted the decision of the producers of *Archer* to avoid controversy and remove the fictional spy agency, the International Spy Intelligence Service (ISIS) from the show following the 'real-world' rise of the Islamic State in 2014. Thorogood argues that the ISIS controversy demonstrates how the geopolitical meanings and affects produced by satirical cartoons should be seen as complex, emergent, and relational socio-material effects. Weir (2018) through archival research, analyses BBC Radio, and specifically the BBC's Middle Eastern Relay (MERS) network, as an aspect of Britain's post/late-imperial project and a geopolitical assemblage that consists of material and discursive components, and operates at multiple scales, sites, and intensities of governance. For example, he explores how the accelerated move of the British MERS from Perim, Yemen to the island of Masirah, Oman, was in part driven by fire damage to a relay station at Perim, which he reasons, illuminates the agency of material components to produce effects greatly disproportionate to their perceived scalar significance. By doing so, he attends to how thinking through assemblage enables researchers to attend to the effects of forces, agencies and objects together with a broader series of events and practices connected to geopolitical media. Subsequently, these three papers illustrate how assemblage thinking has facilitated greater insights into the social, political and material dimensions of processes of globalisation, such as the trans-nationalisation of popular cultural forms (Pickering 2017; Saunders 2012).

Significantly, feminist (political) geographers and scholars have also turned to assemblage in attending to matters of war, violence, militarisation and militarism. A key illustration of this is the work of Pain and Smith (2008), which considers how fear works in and materialises through assemblage. Here Pain and Smith (2008: 7) explain how fear simultaneously emerges in both the geopolitical and everyday realms by evoking the visual metaphor of the (DNA) double helix:

“the ‘two strands’ carry the same information and are bound by numerous connectors...We could see these connections as events, encounters, movements, dialogues, actions, affects and things...these engagements are fragile...the breaks and discontinuities...might represent the awkward, unfinished, disunited, conflicting nature of relations between the geopolitical and everyday; but ultimately they are inter-reliant and complementary.”

In a similar vein to Pain and Smith, Katz (2007: 356), in her excellent discussion of banal terrorism and performances of security, refers to the “surveillant assemblage”:

“[A] Deleuzian idea that welds “big brother,” whom we’ve familiarized through decades of fear, with rhizomatic surveillance, the current state of the game, which makes vigilance in every direction and at all scales the new normal”.

Likewise, Jasbi Puar (2007) speaks of “terrorist assemblages” and “queer assemblages” in charting the various demarcations of race, gender, class, nation and religion that pervade constructions of terror and terrorist bodies, as she accounts for the manifestations of U.S. homonationalism. Whereas, in a more empirical analysis of the geopolitics and lived experience of combat, Williams (2011) has engaged with the literature of feminist geopolitics and Haraway’s notion of the cyborg in considering UAVs as assemblages that mix together human and machine elements to produce a combat entity. Together then, these feminist scholars in different ways have through assemblage accounted for the complex, relational and socio-material aspects of war and violence. Although this research is influenced by a variety of approaches like those discussed above, many of its arguments are built through an engagement with the theorisations of Jason Dittmer, as I outline next.

3.3. Dittmer and Assemblage

One of the most comprehensive engagements with assemblage and Deleuze and Guattari, comes from the political geographer Jason Dittmer, whose work this research will seek to extend on in exploring the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and streams. A key figure in critical geopolitics (and especially popular geopolitics) following his analyses of *Captain America* comic books and nationalist superheroes, Dittmer has looked to redirect the sub-discipline towards adopting a research agenda that better engages with the 'lived', everyday geopolitical experience (see Dittmer and Gray 2010). Pertinently, in building on these ideas Dittmer (2013a) has examined how assemblage thinking in combination with complexity theory can be used to illuminate the socio-material relations that form and are formed by geopolitical discourse. In doing this, he has drawn from the philosopher Manuel DeLanda's (2006) assemblage theory, which is itself an extension and reconfiguration of Deleuzoguattarian concepts. Chiefly, DeLanda proposes a third axis of genetic / linguistic resources in addition to the original two axes of (re)territorialisation / deterritorialisation and material / expressive. This third dimension exists to explain how the identity of assemblages can become more or less rigid through processes of coding and decoding (DeLanda 2006; Dittmer 2017). For instance, the more formal and structured a conversation is, the more we can consider this social encounter or assemblage to be coded. Pertinently, as Dittmer (2013a) notes, in critical geopolitics this process can be distinguished as discourse, but it also includes other non-linguistic forms of coding such as DNA or computer code. Additionally, as DeLanda clarifies, a genetic or linguistic element is, in terms of its agency and capacity to interact, equivalent to any other component that constitutes an assemblage. Thus, DeLanda's assemblage theory maintains the same emphases on relations of exteriority and indefinite capacities for components to interact as outlined by Deleuze and Guattari.

Dittmer (2013a) identifies how an orientation towards materiality in critical geopolitics can be shaped through commitments to a 'more-than-human' geopolitics and a 'flat' (or at least flatter), relational ontology. This engagement with materiality in a post-human geopolitics is highly significant due to the well-established, problematic history of the field discussed in the previous chapter. Critical geopolitics is strongly committed to humanism, wholly rejecting both the environmental determinism central to classical geopolitical thinking and the focus on geography and resources that shaped Cold War geopolitics (Dittmer 2014; Squire, 2015). However, as assemblage thinking diverges from the 'relations of *interiority*' that typifies much

of the literature of classical geopolitics by instead stressing ‘relations of *exteriority*’, it means there can be no suggestions of determinism. To again clarify, power is enacted through assemblage and distributed through its human and non-human components, with it being the properties of elements and their indefinite capacities for interaction that shape outcomes in highly contingent ways. As Dittmer (2017) elucidates, referring to the work of Bruno Latour, this power exists in two forms; as *pouvoir*, the actualised power from a concrete ensemble of relations that produces effects; and *puissance*, the immanent power to affect and be affected that exceeds these ensembles. Importantly, as Dittmer (2013a) remarks, this stress on ‘relations of exteriority’ does not ignore how humans are able to exercise intentionality and reflexivity, but rather is supposed to emphasise the embodied, material relations that humanity has with the world. Indeed, as Dittmer (2017) has acknowledged, even social assemblages cannot be purely discursive because they invariably encompass human bodies.

3.3.1 Assemblage, Complexity Theory and Bodies Politic

Dittmer (2013a) builds on DeLanda’s assemblage theory further by combining it with complexity theory, and in particular its work on aggregate complexity, which refers to how individual elements work together to create unpredictable, dynamic systems with complex behaviour. While complexity theory had been critiqued for simultaneously being both too generalisable in its usage and too specific to produce general conclusions, he notes that it has been boosted by the rise of assemblage theory as both share several similarities. Dittmer writes how both theories can be defined by as having ‘open’ relations of exteriority, being defined by their interactions and as being historical in nature. Furthermore, he argues that the value of complexity theory can be defined via its concept of emergence (implicit in the philosophy of Deleuze), in which qualities are the effects of the relations between elements. Together, with the notion that assemblages are produced through the interactions of constituent parts and exceed those relations, he contends that complexity theory would enable us to better attend to how assemblages stabilise, destabilise and transform in unpredictable ways. In this way, as Dittmer (2013a: 392) writes, assemblages can be conceived as “emergent wholes defined by their properties, tendencies, and capacities”. Here properties denote the actualised features of the assemblage, while capacities refer to a set of possible outcomes rooted in the properties of interacting assemblages. Subsequently, scholars tasked with charting how abstract, multi-dimensional ‘possibility spaces’ are structured by how the

properties of components or assemblages tend to interact. In these possibility spaces, attractors emerge as points which tend to actualise more often, with the degree to which an attractor actualises signifying how territorialized the assemblage is and the assemblage deterritorialising when the outcomes of interactions exceed its 'tipping point', afterwards either dispersing or reterritorializing around a new attractor. For instance, to take Dittmer's example, the disintegration of Yugoslavia points to the deterritorialisation of an old state assemblage and the reterritorialization of new state assemblages that while distinct from their predecessors, still cluster around the attractor of the state ideal in this topological space. Altogether then, complexity theory enables a better understanding of why assemblages appear stable and coherent yet are vulnerable to change.

Following this, Dittmer (2013a) turns to the notion of the subject, extending on John Protevi's (2009) work on 'bodies politic'. Taking influence from Deleuze and Guattari, among others, Protevi has developed a 'political physiological' perspective that investigates the complex, intimate linkages between human perception, human body, the human mind, and social milieu. In doing so, Protevi (2009: 33) reasons that subjectivity should be understood through the lens of bodies politics which:

“mean[s] to capture the emergent – that is, the embodied and embedded – character of subjectivity: the production, bypassing, and surpassing of subjectivity in the imbrications of somatic and social systems”.

Furthermore, bodies politic can be heuristically distinguished as either first-order or second-order bodies politic, working at three compositional (personal/group/civic) and temporal (short-term/mid-term/long-term) analytical scales (Dittmer 2013a, 2017; Protevi 2009). An individual or first-order body politic is itself an assemblage that shapes the perception of the social categories through which difference is understood and is reliant on various material flows, such as media, food and water. While collective or second-order bodies politic are assemblages that incorporate multiple human bodies, i.e. first-order bodies politic (as well as non-human bodies) participating to some degree in a social or political group, like a nation-state, a military unit or a family. These first- and second-order bodies politic are then mutually co-constituted and linked together through synchronic emergence, or what Deleuze terms mutual presupposition. Dittmer (2013a) subsequently discusses two contributions the concept

of bodies politic can make to critical geopolitics. One, it can tie the geopolitical subject positions conditioned via the discourses disseminated by elites and the political cognition that they enable to the political affects that shape our reactions to events. Two, by seeing our own subjectivity as contingent on our own cognitive and affective interactions, as well as distributed across the different bodies politic in which we participate, it becomes possible to envision the mutual relations working between ourselves and a multiplicity of agencies. For instance, to take Dittmer's example of the panicked protest group, while an individual may not necessarily lose their own subjectivity, if the collective panics when fleeing from a threat then that panic will work in and through the individual's body as they are swept away with the group. Ultimately, as Dittmer surmises, by making geopolitical assemblages the subject of our analyses we can account for both the actualised geopolitical becoming and its 'lines of flight'.

3.3.2 Assemblage and Popular Geopolitics

Dittmer (2017) has since built further on many of these ideas to produce a more-than-human political ontology that stresses dynamism and becoming, in investigating how 'the international community' can be seen as the effect of media, things, people and practices converging in diplomatic/geopolitical assemblages. This work also resonates with work in political geography, such as research in electoral geography (e.g. Page 2019; Dittmer and Page 2015), as well as both studies addressing how the state is embroiled in the everyday and analyses of recent geopolitical events (e.g. Anderson and Wilson 2018; Dittmer and Bos 2019; Ingram 2017; Page and Dittmer 2016). However, most significant here, is how Dittmer has discussed assemblage in relation to popular geopolitical scholarship. One important development is Dittmer's (2015a) reconceptualisation of popular culture as an assemblage. As Dittmer elucidates, the difficult and often dismissive relationship that academia has with popular culture is largely due the way in which it is reduced to being a discrete 'thing'. Subsequently, he contends that popular culture should instead be understood as a 'doing'- the outcome of lively interactions between multifarious actors. As Dittmer (2015a: 48) with reference to his earlier work on Captain America comics explains;

"Any attempt to focus in on one element – for instance, creators' intent or my own reading of the comic – imputes too much power to that one element. Rather, it is the entire assemblage that produces effects"

Thus, as Dittmer argues, by moving beyond the macro, and instead looking at the relations between the diffuse and interacting sites of popular culture it reveals its' enlivening power. Subsequently, this research focuses beyond just the actual Battle Royale videogames and streams, or just the players, to account for the vital nature of the relations formed in ludic assemblage. This is especially important when considering how video games are increasingly amalgamated with film, music and other media as cultural properties, titles and themes are traded between cinema, comics, and video games; to produce a convergent entertainment complex (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009: xvi)

Likewise, recent work from Grayson (2018) and Caso (2018) has, in proposing potential ways forward for the ongoing development of popular geopolitics as a discipline, been influenced by the work of Dittmer, Protevi and Deleuze. Grayson (2018) outlines how popular geopolitics could incorporate the aesthetic turn that is already taking place in political geography and international relations, in an attempt to fully move away from focusing on representation and inter-textuality. He calls for more attention to be paid to what geopolitical work is done in the space between the representation and the real, how this gap is (dis)regarded, the efforts to contract it and its impact on individual and collective bodies. He elucidates that further examination of how cultural artefacts act as geopolitical theories and practices and what forms of geopolitics emerges from the embodied effects of the cultural artefacts, offers greater insights into power relations and the ways in which geopolitics is embodied. Moreover, he also argues that through considering popular geopolitics as 'assemblage' and problematising notions of 'subjectivity', 'the somatic' and 'the cultural', offers new insights into popular geopolitics and the roles of geographical imaginations. In doing so, he draws from work around both 'machinic assemblages' and bodies politic to explore how popular geopolitics produces imaginative geographies that contain a moral grammar about an agenda and forms a range of conditions that increase the likelihood of generating particular bodily affects.

In a similar vein, Caso (2018) outlines the theoretical and methodological contributions that gender studies could make to the study of popular studies, through its insights around gender, sexuality and the body. First, she argues popular geopolitics should engage with gendered spaces and the gendering of spaces, unpack the public/private dualism and commit to a

politics where ‘the political is personal’ - thereby challenging the ‘proper’ space of politics. Secondly, she points to how queer approaches enable scholars to deconstruct how subjects are constituted via processes of normalisation and how popular geopolitics can act to legitimate the political subjectivities and spaces produced through the site of popular culture - which is ‘normally’ relegated to the margins of politics. Thirdly, and most pertinently for this research, Caso (2018) argues that through focusing on ‘the body’, popular geopolitics can better understand how political subjectivities are constructed and materialised through bodily encounters with popular culture. In doing so, she follows Dittmer (2015a: 49) who reasons:

“The human body emerges as important because not only do traces of popular culture materialise in the body – a somatic archive of sorts – but also because the body serves as a site of affective interaction, where new forms of popular culture interact with previous ones, and with experiences of current events, as resources for political subject formation.”

Thus as Caso (2018) elucidates, the body can be understood as the locus where popular culture ‘sticks’ onto corporeal space in such encounters, forming an experience, which informed by past experiences, ideas and values, leads to the construction and materialisation of subjectivities in different and idiosyncratic ways. Subsequently, this research explores how young players through their engagements with videogames, streams and other forms of popular culture have shaped political subjectivities. It is crucial then to engage with the aesthetic and embodied dimensions of Battle Royale videogames and streams, if we are to better understand how they are co-constitutive of geopolitics in everyday life. Having outlined the ways in which research drawing on the work of Deleuze and Guattari, and in particular Dittmer’s conceptualisation of geopolitical assemblage, has helped provide insights into the socio-material relations that constitute geopolitics, the next section focuses on how scholarship around both play and video games has considered assemblage.

3.4. Assemblage, Ethos and Ethnography

As discussed throughout this chapter, assemblage has been used as both a conceptual and methodological tool in a variety of ways across geography and the wider social sciences and humanities. Nevertheless, many of these approaches fail to fully recognise the ethical and political dimensions of assemblage, especially as an ethos of engagement. Indeed, as

Ghoddousi and Page (2020: 6) argue the progressive potentials of assemblage geographies do not always materialise, and they “sometimes remain purely speculative, descriptive, abstract or conceptual, failing to deliver any political potentials or act as an ethos for engaged research”. Likewise, as Kinkaid (2020) writes, the notion of assemblage-as-ethos remains under-developed within geography scholarship, claiming that more than failing to deliver on its political promises, it might actually contain unconsidered and politically regressive potentials. In particular, they highlight three oft-cited issues around assemblage thinking that are especially apparent in this formulation of assemblage-as-ethos, with those being; a) an excessive focus on agency and potential, b) a lack of attention towards issues of structure and power, and c) the production of ahistorical assemblage-based accounts. In addition to these concerns, they also reason that assemblage-as-ethos might also unintentionally promote reactionary and regressive politics through its uncanny resemblance to the “ethos” of neoliberalism, which is similarly celebratory of notions of transformation, mobility, flexibility, flux and self-organisation. Such critiques are similar to those from a previous paper by Kinkaid (2019) where from a feminist standpoint, they outline the limits of assemblage thinking when it comes to properly addressing issues of social difference, power and positionality, as well as related epistemological problems. As Kinkaid (2020) surmises then, assemblage thinking needs to develop an ethical dimension and critically account for matters of inequality, unevenness and entrenched structures, by articulating normative commitments, working with other critical theories and considering how assemblage-as-ethos can be translated into concrete ways of doing research and producing theory, if it is to make a difference to geographical thought.

Nonetheless, as Kinkaid also recognises, efforts have already been made in attending to these aforementioned issues. For instance, Swanton (2010) and Saldanha (2012) in their work on the socio-material constructions of race have referred to notions of ‘viscosity’ and ‘stickiness’ in describing how bodies become racialised through assemblage. While Kinkaid (2019) themselves have demonstrated how a deep engagement with feminist thought would be a productive starting point for thinking about social categories in assemblage geographies. Likewise, Grove and Pugh (2015), in their work on participatory development, examine how assemblage thinking, through directing attention to the affective relations that constitute assemblage, thus enables an affirmative biopolitics where the researcher is radically

positioned as one resource among many others. Lastly and most pertinently here, Ghoddousi and Page (2020) discuss how ethnographic approaches could facilitate political geographers' analyses of, and interventions into the emergent politics of socio-material-affective assemblages. Altogether then, it is clear that there are ways of doing assemblage-as-ethos that are critically reflexive of, and directly engage with ethical, political and epistemological matters. Specifically, this research draws inspiration from Ghoddousi and Page's (2020) assemblage ethnography approach in attending to the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and streams, fully accounting for these political and ethical dimensions to avoid reproducing the issues that have plagued some critical geopolitical scholarship.

3.4.1 Assemblage Ethnography

As Ghoddousi and Page (2020) write, ethnography is a form of embedded qualitative research in which the scholar spends time in the field in order to collect in-depth experiential data. Less a single method, instead it is an epistemological orientation towards the field that calls for the utilisation of a range of methodological tools. Since the late 20th Century, ethnographic methods as derived from anthropology have become commonplace in much of the social sciences and humanities, including social and cultural geography. However, it is only more recently - in the last 15 years or so - that work in critical geopolitics and political geography, has utilised ethnographic methods. This development came following comments from feminist geopolitical scholars like Hyndman (2004) and other political geographers like Megoran (2006) that work in the discipline excessively focused on discourse and representation and thus neglected 'the everyday' - critiques that were discussed in more detail in the previous chapter. Specifically, Hyndman's (2004) call for work in 'feminist geopolitics' to practice grounded, embodied qualitative methodologies in order to answer the question "security for whom and how?". Subsequently, ethnographic methods like in-depth interviews and participant observation, have been used by feminist geographers to make sense of these lived and intimate experiences of geopolitics and attend to the everyday contexts and embodied sites that inform broader geopolitical processes (e.g. Brickell 2014; Fluri 2011; Pain et al. 2010). More explicitly, Megoran argues that textual analysis is in danger of producing lopsided or even irrelevant accounts that fail to fully comprehend the spatiality of political processes. Furthermore, as illustrated by his example of how Uzbeks and Kyrgyzstanis negotiated boundary control regimes in Ferghana Valley that were imposed by their governments for the

purpose of nation-building, he reasons that ethnographic participant observation can complement textual analyses by highlighting discrepancies between elite and everyday political geographical imaginations. These critiques as Woon (2013) surmises, point to new, potentially transformative ways of 'doing' geopolitics, through foregrounding the alternative, grounded, personal narratives that are obscured by hegemonic discourse, thus in turn exemplifying the multiple geographies and politics of knowledge production.

As Ghoddousi and Page (2020) elucidate, ethnography has not only bolstered understandings of official state actors and institutions, but have also offered insights into previously ignored political subjectivities in exploring the practices of workers, migrants and other 'ordinary' people, therefore enabling the production of a different spatial politics. Likewise, they stress how ethnography has enabled scholars to bring to light the significant roles that emotions, affects and 'the everyday' play in the experience of the political. A key example of this is Johnson-Schlee's (2019) ethnography of a soup kitchen in Brixton in London, in which he explores how conspiracy theories work through a number of scales in linking together the everyday and the geopolitical, as its precarious users negotiate the punitive austerity policies enacted by the British state as a result of the global financial crisis. However, Ghoddousi and Page argue that assemblage theory goes further than challenging bounded representations of space and subjectivity, due to its promise of an affirmative politics of difference with more progressive, nuanced and inclusive potentials. In particular, they emphasise that by paying attention to the affects and relations that constitute assemblages, scholars can be open to the emergent political agencies of assemblages and actualise their more progressive potentials, building convivial ties through the exchange of positive affects and the production of new solidarities and collective subjectivities. Yet, to raise the likelihood for these progressive potentials to materialise, Ghoddousi and Page contend that ethnography should be combined with assemblage. Here they argue that together such an approach allows for an empirically grounded focus on 'the everyday', a shift away from static, bounded totalities towards undetermined, fluid and always-becoming multiplicities, as well as recognition of the 'more-than human' and affective dimensions of these constellations. They subsequently reference the example of Ghoddousi's ethnographic research in which he participated in multiple assemblages of social gathering, collective action, and political campaigning with (mostly) Iranian migrants in London. Here using an assortment of ethnographic approaches, like 'auto-

ethnography', 'netnographies' and 'participant sensation', in combination with observations, participatory workshops and activism, he sought to explore how processes of solidary-building emerged through these diasporic assemblages. In using this example, Ghoddousi and Page emphasise how assemblage ethnography blurs the boundary between the researcher and the researched, as both are situated in and co-productive of the research assemblage, thereby opening potentials for participant sensation, empathy and solidarity. As they surmise then, assemblage ethnography holds great promise for not just analysing, but also intervening in the emergent politics of socio-material-affective assemblages, be it in the form of activism and/or research outputs.

My research looks to intervene in the form of the latter, as it reveals how geopolitics emerges in the everyday lives of young gamers. To elucidate, through assemblage ethnography, I study the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and streams that emerge through the intersections of play, work, popular culture, geopolitics and everyday life to better understand the extent to which these games and streams are instructive of "Empire". Indeed, here as a post-human geographer, I turn to ludic assemblage as a mode of attending to the ludic in formation, which will involve being open to the ambiguity of play and actively exercising my own capacities for play when engaging with the immanence and potentialities of these liminal, experimental space-times (c.f. Anderson and McFarlane 2011). In other words, I openly recognise my positionality as both a gamer and researcher in playfully engaging with and responding to the affects of the studied assemblages - which I reflect on further in the next chapter when discussing my use of auto-ethnographic methods. The framework for such an approach is informed by both scholarship in popular geopolitics and game studies that has used assemblage and/or ethnography in the study of play and videogames, as outlined next.

3.5 Assemblage, Ethnography and Play

In an ethnographic study of geopolitical gaming, Dittmer (2015b) conceptualises *MUN* and *Statecraft* as virtual spaces of mediation and examines how both simulation games are co-productive of the assemblage of international relations. Working from an assemblage-based approach and informed by relational understandings of space from within geography, he discusses how social outcomes are produced out of multiple, intersecting space-times. Here

play is one way in which the 'geopolitical' present emerges from the collision between the past (i.e. acting from embodied memory) and future (i.e. opening bodies up for future action and playing in anticipation of future needs). Subsequently, each individual game is a highly structured, experimental space that unfolds out from and folds back into the everyday world (see Ingram 2012). While usefully, Dittmer (2015b: 910) offers a specific definition of assemblage that this research extends on:

"Assemblages are constellations of objects, bodies, and ideas brought into relation with one another, and interacting in a way that produces emergent effects that can both be a kind of collective agency as well as a force for change among the assemblage's constituent elements."

Through participant observation and interviews, Dittmer looks at how these games are coded (i.e. structured by certain procedures and rules) to shape participants' subjectivities according to the hegemonic, state-centric and antagonistic visualisations of the world that are associated with mainstream IR theory and neoclassical geopolitics. Yet, he also finds that due to the heterogeneity and complexity of these game assemblages, they provided opportunities for decoding the assemblage and the emergence of alternative spatialities. Indeed, he found that players had a wide variety of objectives that exceeded the mainstream IR and neoclassical geopolitical theories underpinning the game, be it playing to win, to simply have fun, or to improve themselves. Moreover, players circumvented the 'formalised', over-coded spaces of debate in parallel communicative and social spaces that proved instrumental to the games outcomes. For instance, in *MUN* players communicated via text messages, Facebook, or paper notes. Likewise, face-to-face communication was preferred over the clunky email system in the digital space of *Statecraft*. Dittmer concludes then by emphasising the critical possibility of play for transforming our bodies and subjectivities and producing a more just and hopeful geopolitics. In doing so, Dittmer (2015b) exemplifies Woodyer's (2012) point that play is not an activity but rather a mode of being in the world, while also further demonstrating both the need for all geographers to take play seriously (Horton 2018; Woodyer 2018) and for political geographers to offer alternative geopolitical imaginings (see Koopman 2011).

Similarly, in more recent work going under the label of 'ludic geopolitics', and as partially outlined in the previous chapter, Carter et al. (2016) and later Woodyer and Carter (2020) have

through ethnographic approaches attended to the complexity and potentially transformative nature of children's practices of war play. Specifically, Carter et al. (2016) have conducted ethnography with children at the War Games exhibition at the Museum of Childhood to find how they responded to geopolitical narratives. While later, Woodyer and Carter (2020) have observed children's domestic 'war play' with *Her Majesty Armed Forces* toy range in a domestic setting. In doing so, these scholars have helped to foreground the ways in which children develop (geopolitical) subjectivities through (war) play, as well as demonstrated how geopolitics itself is (re)produced through the banal, everyday encounters between texts, objects, bodies, and practices. Significantly here, Woodyer and Carter (20) argue and illustrate that agency is not fully possessed by the cultural producers and totally transmitted in the toys and games they make, but in these embodied practices of play flows through the entire assemblage. This speaks to both the ambiguity and complexity of play, as well as again reaffirms Dittmer's (2015a) statement that popular culture should be understood as an assemblage - an idea that this research turns to in looking at embodied practices of videogaming and streaming.

3.6. Assemblage, Ethnography and Videogames

As discussed in the previous chapter, a great deal of research as informed by post-phenomenology and non-representational theory, has explored videogaming as a cultural practice and examined the materialities of affective qualities of videogames. In doing so, scholars have used a variety of methods in researching practices of videogaming, including ethnography. Of particular interest here however is Giddings' (2009) work outlining a 'microethological' approach to videogaming, where gameplay is defined as an 'event' mutually constituted from the playful and aesthetic relationships between human and non-human participants. In doing so, he calls for scholars to look beyond 'identification', i.e. the affectual relationship between the human subject and the avatar, criticising how many studies of videogames are based on inferred assumptions of human agency and identity. Giddings (2009: 156), suggests that the term 'collusion' better describes the relationship of human and non-human in gameplay, stressing the terms' etymological associations with 'coming together' and 'play', and how it "indicates the video game's material distribution of agencies and the positioning of agents, bodies, or part(icipant)s". This micro-ethological approach towards videogaming, while not explicitly referring to assemblage, cites Deleuze, and shares many

similarities in referring to an engagement with the multiple relations involved in the 'event' of gameplay. This in turn further demonstrates Dittmer's (2015a) argument that popular culture should be thought of as a 'doing', an assemblage.

The concept of assemblage is certainly not alien to games studies as both Taylor (2009) and Behrenshausen (2012) have turned to Deleuzoguattarian notions of assemblage to better engage with the complexity of gameplay (see also O'Donnell 2011 for similar work done via actor-network theory). Taylor (2009) has explored the dynamic interrelations and processes involved in and between the various actors (e.g. technological systems and software, human bodies and communities) that constitute gameplay to analyse how user-produced modifications ('mods') were deployed in a raid encounter in *World of Warcraft* (WoW). Specifically, she examines how mods to the user interface act as extra, non-human raid 'members' that can radically reconfigure gameplay by translating and communicating information to the other players in the raid. Yet, these mods can also fail if improperly synched or if human players are using different versions, thereby requiring them to 'log-off' and update the 'mod' or even end up conducting the mods' functions themselves. Thus, as Taylor (2009: 336) argues, there is "a complex set of relationships between not only the player and their software, but the collective use of software and the production of group practices". Subsequently, Taylor illustrates both the range of agents involved in videogaming and how players become embedded in gameplay assemblages, accentuating how agency is distributed throughout these assemblages rather than concentrated in any one individual (human or non-human) body.

Behrenshausen (2012) considers how thinking through assemblage would enable game studies to move past the problematic, epistemological assumptions and methodological limitations inherent to the 'active audience' model. Here, he critiques player-centric research for furthering the reductive, anthropocentric binary of the 'active' player-agent and a 'restrictive' game-structure, as well as for viewing player's agency as being the result of their subjectivity while ignoring the agency of the non-human entities actively involved in gameplay. Behrenshausen subsequently illustrates the limits of the active audience model through the case of 'gold farming' in WoW. To elucidate, the practice of 'gold farming' involves playing a

massively multiplayer online game (MMO) like *WoW* to acquire in-game currency, later selling it for real-world money, and is a heavily racialised form of labour, one that is highly instructive of ludocapitalism (Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter 2009). Behrenshausen contends that under the emancipatory politics characteristic of player-centric research, 'gold-farming' can be thought of as creatively exploiting the game's structures and resources in a form of resistance against an oppressive capitalist structure. This form of politics can therefore be considered problematic since it celebrates the creativity of gold farmers and their abusive bosses, when in fact this practice is symbolic of the exploitative processes of "Empire". It also supports Kinkaid's (2020) point that scholars should avoid producing a reactionary and regressive neoliberal form of politics in praising notions of transformation, mobility, flexibility, flux and self-organisation. Subsequently, as Behrenshausen reasons, game research should not necessarily be reducible to struggles between player-agents and game-structures, as it does not account for the variegated operations of power (i.e. racial, geopolitical, cultural etc.) that intersect gaming situations. Instead, he argues that videogaming should be conceived of as an assemblage, since it would enable scholars to examine the power relations that have been created between heterogeneous elements. It would then he surmises, facilitate a shift away from the problematic, anthropogenic and reductive assumptions inherent to the 'active audience' model. As such, this research takes heed in not over-emphasising the agency of young gamers and streamers, in highlighting the potentially problematic nature of some of their practices. It is also crucial to recognise as Taylor (2018) explains that young gamers are not just players of videogames, but also engage in variety of media and leisure practices that take place and intersect through, across and in multiple platforms and communities. Indeed, while the titular focus of this thesis is on Battle Royale videogames and live-streams, it is important to "be attuned to the *assemblage* that makes up our media lives in order to fully understand what is happening" (Taylor 2018: 13: italics in original). Or again as Dittmer (2015a) puts it, rather than focusing just on a singular discrete thing, there needs to be a critical, holistic engagement with popular culture as a 'doing', an assemblage.

3.6.1 *Ethnography and Ludic War*

Bos (2018b) and Payne (2010) demonstrate the value of ethnographic methods in understanding the complexity of (military-themed) videogames via their research into the social, material and spatial contexts through which the ludic activity of playing war takes place.

Here, Payne (2010) explores how gamers relate to each other while engaging in the co-constitutive, liminal experience of what he terms 'ludic war', in the collaborative and competitive play space of a commercial Local Access Network (LAN) gaming centre. As Payne (2010: 211) explains 'ludic war' is "a contingent social activity that is symbolically militarised through the use of specific games", which through its liminality has enabled power hierarchies in these mediated worlds of virtual war to be reified and replayed in the real world. Specifically, he explains how playing war in this homosocial space has led to a highly gendered discourse that privileges domination to egalitarianism, with players performing according to a set of presumed norms. Here players also policed the social transgressions of others through virtual and real-world exchanges, such as playful sparring matches and the mocking of 'feminine' games. Moreover, as the majority of players were young, straight, white men they tolerated 'off-colour' conversations and otherwise offensive (e.g. racist, sexist, homophobic) jabs. Yet, they confronted others for actions viewed as inviolable, from forms of cheating like 'screen peaking' to not following the 'proper' ludic war protocols. Altogether then, Payne illuminates the power of this nexus of militarism, technology and male gamers, by illustrating the ways in which publicly performed ludic warring escaped its mediated bounds to structure and regulate the playing experience in this emergent, highly gendered, racialised, classed and heteronormative space of the gaming centre.

Meanwhile, Bos (2018b) through the use of semi-structured interviews, 'gaming interviews' and video ethnographies with players of *Call of Duty*, explores the 'event' of geopolitical consumption. The paper examines how by becoming attuned to the actual practices, performances and preferences of individual players, researchers can better attend to the variegated, everyday ways in which they encounter geopolitical discourse. For instance, he discusses how the majority of players only temporarily and passively engaged with the single-campaign mode, and instead preferred playing multiplayer modes and being able to compete against others. Furthermore, he identifies how players' interactions across private, public and virtual spheres, shape the domestic setting and their experiences of geopolitics. For example, he points to how gaming is considered a masculine activity, with the presence of the games console in the shared space of the living room subsequently unveiling the wider gendered social power relations of media consumption occurring in the domestic setting. Additionally, he details how online communities in the multiplayer mode often produced highly gendered,

heteronormative, racialised milieu where players performed national affiliations and personal world views. Lastly, he demonstrates how geopolitical affects, like the embodied act of firing a virtual weapon, emerge through a contingent array of social, material and technological factors and relations (e.g. player's preferences), illustrating the (re)making of geopolitical meaning in everyday life. Together then, both Bos and Payne offer grounded, empirical insights into the spaces and means through which people internalise, engage with and encounter these games as part of their lived experience of geopolitics. Or in other words, they shed light on some of the ways in which (military-themed) videogaming actually 'plays out' in everyday life, which this research aims to do through exploring how ludic assemblages emerge through everyday life and in relation to the multitude and "Empire".

3.7 Assemblage, Machines and "Empire"

As noted in the previous chapter, the work of Deleuze and Guattari has been a key influence for Hardt and Negri (2000, 2004) in their conceptualisation of "Empire" and the multitude, and subsequently Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter's (2009) work on videogames and "Empire". Pertinently, this includes Deleuze and Guattari's notions of assemblage and machines. Firstly, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) refer to 'technical machines', the instruments through which humans transform nature, such as the car or lawnmower, and which develop in particular families and genealogies of related devices. Specifically, they order such instruments into taxonomic categorisations, as being parts of different lineages and phyla, each with its own particular properties and techniques of production. For instance, the iron sword descends from the dagger lineage but is in a different phylum to the steel saber and its ancestor, the knife, due to their different affects. Secondly, there are social machines which are functionally connected assemblages of human subjects and technical machines - like weapons and tools. Here they refer to the example of the man-horse-stirrup constellation - a whole military apparatus or "war machine". Thirdly, and most radically, according to Deleuze and Guattari (1983), is the notion that humans themselves are desiring machines. In a similar vein to Protevi's (2009) later conceptualisation of first-order bodies politic, the two thinkers emphasise how our subjectivities are assembled from biological, societal and technical apparatuses in a continuous process of becoming that in turn generates new alignments of bodies, cognition and feeling. For example, the figure of the male warrior that has long been rooted in Western cultural imagination, was a subjectivity that emerged through an

assemblage of specifically sexed bodies, skill with carefully crafted weapons like swords, relationships with animals - in particular, horses - and through processes of colonisation and conquest. In short, under Deleuze and Guattari, human subjects can be seen as desiring machines who are produced in part through technical machines.

Notably, as Deleuze and Guattari (1983) write, capitalism is a global production machine that is assembled from and continually appropriates flows of labour, finance, and technology through processes of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation. Hardt and Negri have since expanded on this idea further in discussing “Empire” as a machine, in which global capital assembles itself from intertwined social, technical and subjective components. While more specifically, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009: 71 – italics in original) consider game consoles, such as the Xbox, as techno-social assemblages that configure machinic subjectivities, writing:

“We open up the Xbox and its console rivals as state-of-the-art *technical machines* made of chips and circuits; as components of giant *corporate machines*; as time machine for profitably using up software and other virtual commodities; as *generators of machinic subjects*, mobilizing the passions and practices of hard-core gamers; as contenders in the competitive machine wars of video game capital, but also at the same time of the transgressive, subversive war machines of nomadic gamer hacking and piracy; and last, through all these preceding machine moments, as part of *the global biopolitical machine of “Empire”*.”

Nevertheless, while it is imperative to recognise these relations, the focus of this thesis is less on the Xbox as a technical machine or its producers Microsoft as a corporate machine, but instead how as an assemblage it is generative of subjectivities. As Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009) further elucidate, the Xbox was configured towards and reproductive of hyper-masculine “hard-core” subjects, in terms of its complex controller, its selection of sports, action, racing and fighting games and enabling an exclusionary, networked techno-culture in which sexism, racism and homophobia is/was commonplace. At the same time however, this has led to the production of subjectivities that exceed “Empire”, namely that of the hacker, thereby illustrating in the words of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), how there is the potential for emergent human-technical configurations to make unexpected associations and take

disruptive 'lines of flight'. Deleuze and Guattari's term this nomadism, which derives from the warrior horsemen of the Asian steppes who in assembling new combinations of horse, sword, bow and rider waged war on empires as mobile "war machines" that employ subversive uses of technology. Extending on these ideas, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009: 84) consider how hackers themselves are a modern form of nomads, engaging in practices such as piracy, which derive "from the very attributes of the hard-core subjectivity the Xbox fostered, imbued with masculine techno-expertise and an audacity that sees repurposing code as just another dimension of play". Subsequently, this research will turn to how the ludic/social machines or assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and Twitch streams are reproductive of "hard-core" subjects who compose a hyper-masculine technoculture and are equally generative of nomads who threaten to destabilise such assemblages and thus "Empire".

Building on these ideas, this research seeks to explore how the spectacle of ludic war emerges through 'social machines', the complex assemblages that emerge through human and non-human interactions across a number of spaces and scales, with assemblage ethnography here being used to better understand the range of actors, processes, environments and relations that make up the play/stream moment and their affective qualities (Taylor 2009). Moreover, in recognising these encounters as events, which Ash (2010b: 667) defines as the "outcome of a material assemblage of various entities, forces, and rules working together to encourage and prohibit specific forms of movement and action", this research looks to highlight how the resulting affects upon the body are not predefined. Likewise, in taking forward Power's (2007: 284) claim that videogames are "affective assemblages through which geopolitical sensibilities emerge", this research attends to the heterogeneous components of the ludic assemblages which render these geopolitical encounters possible (Dittmer 2013a, 2013b). I argue then that thinking through assemblage together with a range of ethnographic methods helps overcome binary constructions such as 'public and private', 'virtual and real', 'micro and macro', 'human and non-human', and instead uncovers the multiple actors, spaces and relations that constitute the geopolitics of ludic war, and in turn "Empire". To be clear then, in utilising this approach and through understanding "Empire" itself as an assemblage that is co-constituted through the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and streams, this research will map some of the ways in which it emerges through the complex patterns and doings of everyday life. In addition, this work recognises that the multitudinous potential of these

assemblages are indefinite and carry with them multiple lines of flight, and thus elucidates how practices of videogaming, streaming and spectating can both animate and destabilise “Empire”.

3.8 Concluding Remarks

To summarise, this chapter has explored how geographers and others have used assemblage and ethnography, both together and separately in their research as theoretical, conceptual and methodological approaches. In setting out Dittmer’s conceptualisation of the geopolitical assemblage, this chapter has emphasised how such an approach can enable better understandings of the socio-material relations that constitute both geopolitics and popular culture. Likewise, this chapter has outlined how ethnographic methods allow for greater insights into the everyday and the various lived experiences of geopolitics. While in outlining Ghoddousi and Page’s (2020) methodology of assemblage ethnography, it has explored how such an approach can be used to analyse and intervene in the emergent politics of socio-material-affective assemblages. Building on these ideas and turning to work from popular geopolitical scholarship and game studies, I subsequently conceptualised the ludic assemblage as a way of attending to the ludic in formation, in understanding how Battle Royale videogames and streams are instructive of processes of “Empire” and the multitude. The following chapter will now discuss the various methods that were conducted under the label of assemblage ethnography, in analysing the ways in which young people are co-constitutive of the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and livestreams.

Chapter 4: Doing Ludic Assemblage with Young Gamers

This research used various methods to examine the ways in which young people are co-constitutive of and affected through the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and live-streams. Firstly, this chapter discusses how work in geography and social sciences has engaged with young people. Specifically, it will outline how this body of work has recognised young people as active social and political actors, and used a variety of qualitative methods to examine their everyday experiences, but also highlight recent scholarship problematising notions of agency in relation to the 'more-than-human' and the increasingly blurry categorisations of childhood and youth. The second section of this chapter then focuses on the qualitative methods used in exploring gamers' interactions across both digital and physical gaming spaces in the context of developments in digital culture. In showing parallels between the methodologies of both game studies and the geographies of children, youth and family, this chapter will subsequently set out how research on young gamers can be done through assemblage ethnography (Ghoddousi and Page 2020). There is then a brief overview of how assemblage ethnography as an approach enabled me to adapt 'fieldwork' as I negotiated the Covid-19 pandemic. The following sections will then detail the exact methods employed when doing fieldwork, those being videogame stream ethnography, participant observation, semi-structured interviews and auto-ethnographic methods, as I investigated how these ludic assemblages emerged in young gamers' everyday lives.

4.1 Studying Young People

Research on children and young people within the social sciences has developed significantly following wider academic debates about identity and difference during the 1980s and 1990s. Social scientists eschewed essentialist assumptions about identity to instead unpack and explore the social constructions of race, gender, sexuality, age, class and other signifying categories (Aitken 2001; Holloway and Valentine 2000; Hopkins 2010; Pain 2001). The first of these bodies of scholarship, the New Social Studies of Childhood (NSSC), has its origins in the 1980s, as sociologists and other social scientists, critiqued child development theories from psychologists like Piaget, for considering childhood in relation to children's development and paying little attention to its social and historical context (Aitken 2019a; Prout 2005). The spark for much of this work came following the signing of the United Nations Convention on the

Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1989, with its focus on protection, provision and participation, thus opening up debates on what constitutes children and childhood. Subsequently, scholars involved in the NSSC have challenged linear, biological models of child development in psychology and adult-centred approaches to socialisation in sociology by forming a new paradigm (Aitken 2019; Benwell and Hopkins 2016; Holloway et al. 2019). Chiefly, as James (2010) writes the NSSC was built on three key ideas:

“[First,] children could – and should – be regarded as social actors, second, that childhood, as a biological moment in the life course, should nonetheless be understood as a social construction; and finally, there was methodological agreement about the need to access children’s views first hand” (Prout 2010: 216).

By doing so, this literature has helped to forefront how categories like ‘children’, ‘childhood’, ‘young people’ and ‘youth’ are contested, fluid and ambiguous terms that vary across cultures and contexts, sites and spaces, and change over time (Benwell and Hopkins 2016).

As Valentine (2003: 38) usefully points out “the terms ‘youth’ or young people are popularly used to describe those aged 16-25, a time frame that bears no relation to diverse legal classifications of adulthood”. Likewise, as Kehily (2007: 3) remarks, “definitions of ‘youth’ in Western societies usually refer to the life stage between childhood and adulthood, the transitional period between being dependent and becoming independent”. As geographers like Ansell (2004) and Hopkins (2010) write, despite the fact that all young people in some way experience age-based discrimination, youth does not constitute a homogeneous group. Rather young people are fractured by differences of age, with some young people defined as children and others deemed adults due to embodying qualities characteristic of adulthood, as well as being further divided by other lines of difference. As Heath et al. (2009) explain, youth research is distinct from research on other groups for four reasons. Firstly, young people’s lives are structured by a range of specific contexts and institutions. Secondly, young people are circumscribed by age-specific policies and legislation. Thirdly, youth is constructed as a critical time of transition and individual development within the life course. And fourthly, young people are placed into a relatively powerless group in relation to the research process. This picture is only made more complicated by the fact that as Smith and Mills (2019) point out, the boundaries between the categories of childhood, youth and adulthood are becoming ever

less distinct. In noting the emergence of 'kidults', that is millennials aged 18-33 who have seemingly 'failed' the transition to adulthood and the commodification of this 'adulthood' through new leisure spaces in the Global North, they consider how there is a vacillating or unsteady 'swaying' between childhood, youth and adulthood.

In the sub-field of the Geographies of Children, Youth and Families (GCYF), which has developed from the NSSC, there has been a number of social and cultural geographers engaging with the diversity of spaces, experiences and agencies of young people and children in their everyday lives (e.g. Harker 2005; Kraftl et al. 2013; McDowell et al. 2020; Ross, 2007; see also Holloway and Valentine 2000). With this commitment to foregrounding children's voices and agency, and through the use of ethnographic and/or participatory methods, scholars have illuminated various aspects of children and young people's everyday lives. Specifically, in engaging with their experiences of work, education, family, community life and (social) mobility/migration, scholars have attended to how these become entangled with processes of globalisation, development and neo-liberalisation (e.g. Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2014; Horton 2016; Kraftl et al. 2013; McDowell et al. 2020; Punch 2015). Pertinently, as outlined in Chapter 2, this includes research done on the discourses and spaces of children's play, where again through ethnographic methods, geographers have both illustrated how play and work intertwine in children's everyday lives and emphasised children's agency in shaping wider society (e.g. Harker 2005; Katz 2004; Thomson and Philo 2004). Additionally, there has also been more recent work done on how children and young people in the UK negotiate precarity and austerity (e.g. Bonner-Thompson and McDowell 2021; Horton 2016; McDowell et al. 2020)

Yet it took longer for political geographical scholarship to attend to young people and children and their political participation. This previous absence of children and young people within political geography, as Philo and Smith (2003) explain, is simply due to the narrow assumption at the time that people below voting age could not and did not have much active influence on the workings of states, nations and geopolitics. In recognition of this the two geographers assert that researchers striving to empower young people as political actors, should concentrate on the connections and transitions between 'Politics' / 'politics' (see O'Toole

2003). Here big 'P' politics or macro-politics refers to the formal/public sphere of politics conducted by institutional actors like the state, while small 'P' politics refers to informal/private sphere of politics centred on (young peoples') personal experiences. Following Philo and Smith's concerns, a great deal of work has focused on the (political) geographies, discourses and practices of children's and young people's citizenship, participation, rights and agency and their (marginal) political status (e.g. Bosco 2010; Crawley 2010; Mills 2013; see Skelton 2013). Traversing these bodies of scholarship there has also been the development of a critical geopolitics of children and young people (see Benwell and Hopkins 2016a). Like work in children's geographies it has been informed significantly by feminist geographers seeking to address the absence of marginalised groups in geopolitical accounts by exploring the role of geopolitical power in people's daily lives, and documenting how people resist, challenge and rework geopolitics (Dowler and Sharp 2001; Hyndman 2007; Massaro and Williams 2013). In conducting this work, geographers have used a variety of qualitative methods such as interviews, focus groups and participatory methods to uncover the complex ways through which young people negotiate and critically engage with geopolitics across multiple scales in their everyday lives. As such, this research has recognised young people as (geo)political actors, unpacking the complexities of their political subjectivities, agencies and actions. Nevertheless, there has been a paucity of work engaging with how young people's political subjectivities and agencies are shaped by their engagements with popular culture - an argument that I extend on in Chapter 8

More recently in GCYF, geographers and other social scientists have also begun to problematise notions of agency. As Holloway et al. (2019) write, NSSC is based on the idea that children are competent social actors, but within earlier scholarship this rather political assertion has been taken for granted and remained under-theorised. As such, they call for scholars to shift away from celebrations of young people's agency, which are implicitly founded on both liberal conceptions of the subject and a sense of romanticism over the virtuosity of youth. In attending to notions of capacity, subjectivity, spatiality and temporality, they subsequently propose a biosocial approach towards the emergent, embodied, enduring and mutable nature of specifically human agency. This aligns with work that has explored the non-human, more-than human and relational aspects of young people's lives (e.g. Ruddick 2003; Harker 2005; Marshall 2013). As Aitken (2019a) comments, in the last decade, this work has

helped to destabilise problematic categories of the child/human, with the fluid, hybrid figure of the post-child beginning to shape work from inside and outside geography. Specifically, as Aitken (2019a) writes, in emphasising young people's relations, ambiguities, dependencies, autonomies and politics, this work understands the actions, practices and politics of young people as temporally and spatially-specific assemblages of relations with other young people, technologies, adults, animals and materialities. This research builds on how children's geographers have theorised young people as an assemblage by combining it with feminist and popular geopolitical scholarship attending to the materiality of the body (e.g. Caso 2018; Dittmer 2015a) and (game)play (e.g. Dittmer 2015b; Woodyer and Carter 2018). To clarify, in extending on Dittmer's (2013) approach, (young) people's/gamers' bodies here are understood as first-bodies politic and assemblages - or desiring machines in the words of Deleuze and Guattari (1983) - that shape how we perceive social difference (e.g. gender, race and age) and are contingent on various material flows, such as food, water and most pertinently here, media. Thus, as I look to illustrate in this thesis, the conceptualisation of young people as an assemblage enables a deeper understanding of the emergent inter-relations between young gamers (as both constituent part and assemblage) and the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and streams.

4.2 Studying Gamers

As discussed in the previous two chapters, popular geopolitical scholarship has increasingly moved away from examining 'texts' to instead focus on the geopolitical everyday (Dittmer and Gray 2010). As part of this shift, scholars have used a range of qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews, surveys, questionnaires and analysis of online forum discussions - similar to work in the GCYF. Even so, as documented in the previous chapter, there continues to be very few ethnographies within popular geopolitics, which is striking considering the ethnographic work on fandoms within cultural studies and related fields in the social sciences and humanities (see Jenkins 2006). Fittingly, this includes studies on gamers in which scholars have employed ethnographic methods (including; interviews, observations, participant-observation, informal conversations and document analysis) in exploring players' interactions across both digital and physical gaming spaces. For example, Taylor (2006) has explored *EverQuest*, a 3D fantasy-themed massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORGP), charting how a diversity of players through various practices co-constitute and continually

shape these dynamic, socio-cultural, digital spaces. Likewise, Boellstorff (2008) studies *Second Life*, an online multimedia platform that enables people to make an avatar for themselves and then interact with other users and user-created content within a multiplayer online virtual world. In exploring *Second Life* as a site of digital culture, he attends to how rather than existing as a separate 'virtual' space, it is embedded in the everyday lives of its users. In a similar vein, Nardi (2010) has conducted a three-year long study on the everyday experiences of players of the MMORPG *World of Warcraft* (WoW) within the game itself, the United States and internet cafes in China. Engaging with issues of gender, culture and addiction she examines how digital technology facilitates a complex 'world' of social activity. Altogether, these studies highlight the banal, mundane and social dimensions of videogaming, as well as the agency of players in creatively shaping these complex digital 'worlds'. The focus here however has mainly been on MMORPGs, with little attention paid to the communities of other genres of videogames – namely Battle Royales, even despite their popularity and significance within the current gaming scene. Thus, inspired by these studies, my research explores a number of digital and physical spaces that enable the playing, streaming and spectating of ludic war.

Increasingly, scholars attending to the socio-material nature of competitive gameplay have used ethnographic methods. For instance, Taylor (2011) through an audio-visual ethnography of a North American community of competitive *Halo 3* players, charts the similarities in players' embodied performances of professional gaming, across local, national and international events. In attending to how these e-sport events bring young and predominantly male bodies together in close proximity, he examines how a hyper-masculine and deeply homosocial technoculture is (re)produced through embodied performances of competitive digital play. Furthermore, in following developments in game culture, scholars have deployed ethnographic approaches in exploring the practices of livestreaming. For instance, Taylor (2018) has sought to capture the provisional and heterogeneous nature of videogame live-streaming, in attending to the various spaces, places, people and technologies involved in the broadcasting networks. Likewise, Woodcock and Johnson (2019) through ethnographic methods, chiefly interviews with professional and aspiring-professional game broadcasters at gaming events across the United States and Europe, investigate the affective and emotional dimensions of Twitch streaming. In doing so, these scholars show how ethnographic methods enable a greater understanding of the affective, material and embodied dimensions of digital

play and its various geographies. In response to these developments in game culture, this research uses similar ethnographic methods to explore how videogame streaming becomes entangled in neo-liberal, geopolitical and militaristic processes that are symbolic of Hardt and Negri's (2000, 2004) "Empire". In particular, as outlined further in Chapter 7, through data collected from interviews and participant observation, it attends to the ways in which affects of humour and toxicity are co-constitutive of a hyper-masculine, homosocial and militarised technoculture in Twitch streams of Battle Royale videogames.

Nonetheless, it should be emphasised as Bos (2018a) argues, that a focus on fandoms only offers limited insights into whom actually interacts with and consumes geopolitical texts. In fact, as I found out through my research, the identity of 'the gamer' is actually quite fluid and diffuse in nature and it is not just fans who have high levels of emotional investment with the medium (Gosling and Crawford 2011). Furthermore, as Bos usefully points out, some methods such as questionnaire surveys and online forum analysis, elevate audience engagement as a solely interpretative practice, and so offer little contextual detail on the meaningfulness of popular culture and media in their everyday lives. Additionally, as Bos (2018a) notes there is a danger for player-centric research to provide a reductionist, anthropogenic understanding of the gaming situation (see also Behrenshausen 2012). This assertion then has parallels to aforementioned geographical scholarship on children and young people recognising problematic notions of agency, which has subsequently turned to the ways in which they are co-constitutive of their own geographies, such as through practices of play (Woodyer et al. 2018). As such, this research uses a variety of qualitative methods in emphasising the 'more-than-human' relations that emerge through young people's everyday practices of Battle Royale videogaming and streaming, here analysing the affective, material and vital nature of ludic war. In recognising these young gamers as first-bodies politic or 'social machines', as assemblages in and of themselves that are co-constitutive of the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and streams, this research will enable greater insights into the ways in which they live and make up the geopolitical everyday and in turn can animate and destabilise "Empire".

4.3 Researching Ludic Assemblages: Doing Fieldwork during the Covid-19 Pandemic

As discussed in the previous chapter, ethnography involves using a range of methodological tools in exploring the everyday (Ghoddousi and Page 2020), while assemblage itself is considered as carrying with it an ethos of experimentation, with methodological and presentational practices like montage, performative methods, thick description and stories used to attend to processes of agencement (Anderson and McFarlane 2011). Significantly, as Ghoddousi and Page (2020) suggest, fieldwork itself can also be recognised as a material assemblage. Subsequently, in conducting assemblage ethnography, this research took a somewhat improvisational bent in holistically attending to the ludic in formation, with various methods taking place synchronously with each other and then co-constituting and transforming the wider research assemblage. For instance, following my first two interviews with young gamers, I reflected on my own childhood playing these games and worked on this 'line of flight' in focusing on notions of nostalgia in fieldwork going forward. Furthermore, as I discuss in the next chapter, I consider the links between nostalgia, youth and the attention economy in relation to the affective atmospheres and ludic assemblages produced by the gaming lounge. I here then consider the affective dimensions of nostalgia as part of the attention economy produced through videogames, as elucidated further in Chapters 6 and 9. Thinking of fieldwork as an assemblage with multiple 'lines of flight' i.e. directions of study, has thereby helped me focus on the broader processes of the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and streams, as well as trace even more of the indefinite dimensions of the multitude and "Empire" (Hardt and Negri 2000, 2004) as practically possible.

Nevertheless, this improvisational, intuitional style to conducting assemblage ethnography on the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and streams proved valuable when doing fieldwork during the Covid-19 pandemic, which was a 'tipping point' for myself and many others involved in research (assemblages) (Dittmer 2013a). Although much of this research was already planned to be digitally-mediated, the pandemic and corresponding restrictions in the UK still had a number of tangible and intangible effects on fieldwork, most notably in preventing social contact, which thus led me to constantly reconfigure my approach to data collection. Similar to these notions of fieldwork as an assemblage, Eggeling (2022) discusses how researchers should think about treating research fields as methodological and epistemic compositions to develop a more positive vocabulary when dealing with disruptions to fieldwork. Here Eggeling discusses two implications of this line of thought. One is more

methodological, in thinking of fieldwork as a process, both as an embodied craft and a mental state that opens up new paths of interaction and immersion into the worlds under study as researchers renegotiate methods and positionality. And the other is more epistemological, in stressing that 'the field' itself is in flux, especially following ruptures like that of the pandemic, meaning a shift in logic of 'being there' to 'being aware'. As Eggeling concludes, Covid-19 has shown how ethnographic fieldwork is more than a procedural execution of research techniques according to a pre-set research design, but rather an ethos of sensible research practice.

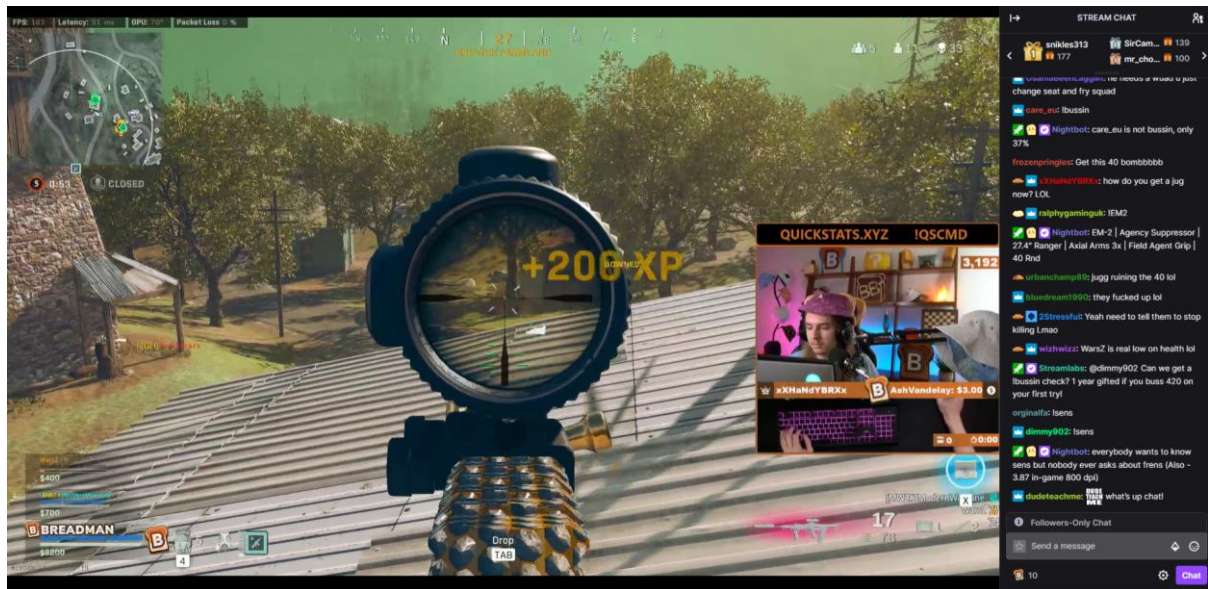
A key instance of this adaptability and improvisation came during fieldwork, where I made the decision to not spectate large videogame events and e-sports competitions, even when these could occur 'in-person' in large physical spaces like arenas, during the latter stages of fieldwork. This was due to the amount of data already collected, but also meant that I could pay greater attention to the banal - but certainly no less important, intense or interesting - aspects of Battle Royale streaming assemblages. Notably, it helped me to highlight the prosaic but enlivening nature of Twitch streams, in considering how videogames have become socially embedded in everyday life and connecting these to broader processes of "Empire" like the banalisation of war. Subsequently, I argue that assemblage ethnography as an approach proved to be significantly valuable in both thinking about and facilitating fieldwork during the pandemic. Through an ethos of engagement towards the ludic in formation in this fieldwork assemblage, I could immerse myself in 'the field' wherever those emergent ludic assemblages may appear and conduct appropriate methods in such spaces. While more generally speaking, this research illustrates the fluid and dispersed nature of fieldwork, and in doing so, shows how there is a need to move away from loaded questions like 'when or where will you be doing fieldwork?' to instead 'how are you engaging your field of research?' within geographical scholarship (Brunn and Guasco 2023). In the conclusion of this thesis, I further evaluate how assemblage ethnography works as methodological approach in engaging with my field or research in attending to the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and streams. However, the focus of this chapter is now the four specific methods employed during fieldwork.

4.4 Gaming Stream Ethnography

Gaming stream ethnography took place on the online video live streaming service Twitch, which as noted in the introduction to this thesis is primarily used by gamers to broadcast their play to a live audience online, but can also be used for music broadcasts, creative content, and "in real life" streams. On Twitch there are also broadcasts of electronic sport or 'esports' competitions, events in which players participate in organised, multi-player competitions on video games to spectators worldwide, which are also sometimes staged in front of live audiences. Additionally, the site can be viewed either live or via video on demand, where previous streams that were recorded can be kept on the streamers' channel. Thus, as Egliston (2020a: 242) states, Twitch is a particularly promising space for "studying how [gameplay] emerges from assemblages of human and non-human". At the same time, however, Twitch exists as an increasingly important and integral social space within the gaming scene. Subsequently, Twitch streams can be understood as both a site for and a method of data collection. As a method, I place this alongside other online research methodologies such as virtual or internet ethnography (e.g. Hine 2015) and digital ethnography (see Boellstorff et al. 2012) that have also been used to explore the social interactions and encounters of online communities and cultures. While as a site for data collection, I recognise Twitch as a form of social media due to its affordances for social networking, information exchange and dialogue, here attending to its geopolitical dimensions in terms of how it then subsequently structures communication, knowledge and action (Adams 2017). Additionally, in thinking about the materialities, technical and affective dimensions of streaming and in particular, how streamers monetise their playbour, these Twitch streams were also treated as a digital interface that mediates user experiences (Ash et al. 2018) - as I expand on in Chapter 5. Although it should of course be recognised that the gaming scene also interacts in other digital spaces such as online forums and other digital platforms, the focus was on Twitch as the most popular live-streaming website. This is so that I could more fully engage with how everyday practices of streaming and spectating videogames are illustrative of the multitude and "Empire" (Hardt and Negri 2000, 2004).

In total, I undertook 18 stream ethnographies lasting between one hour and three hours long - similar to that of the average viewer who watches around 95 minutes a day (Elad 2023) - with

this adding up to approximately 30 hours of watch-time between August 2021 and December 2021. Here I took an intuitive approach to how long I stayed immersed in the field, in acting like an average viewer who may switch off or switch channels once they are bored of the streams, but continue watching if they are enjoying it. Indeed, as I discuss later in the chapter, I reflected on the feelings of enjoyment, excitement and boredom when playfully engaging with these ludic assemblages of Battle Royale Twitch streams.



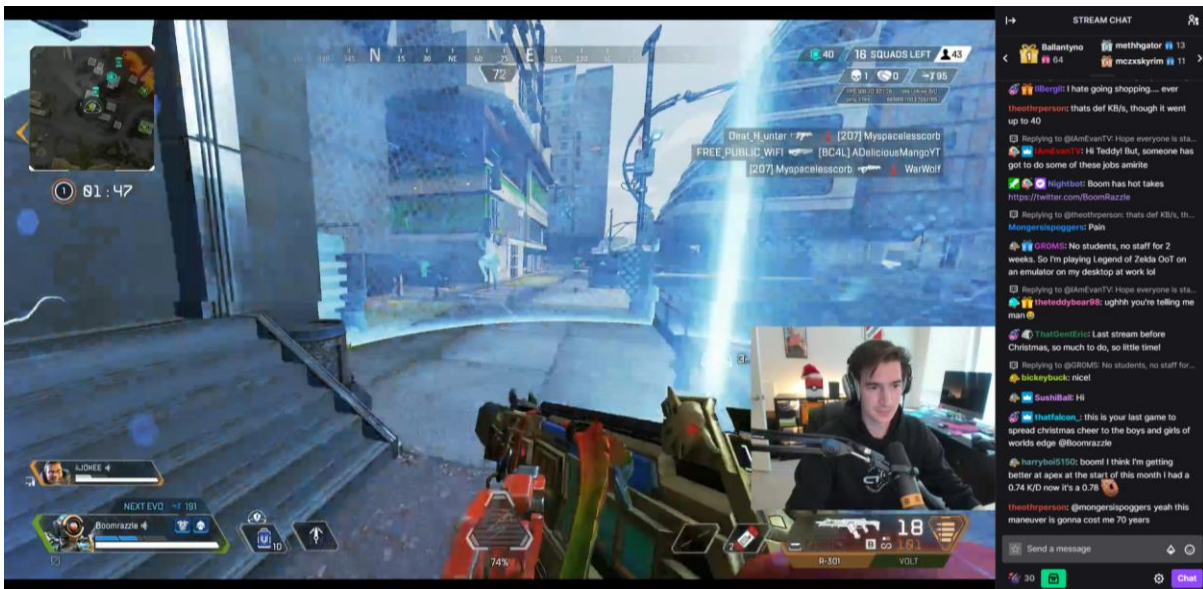
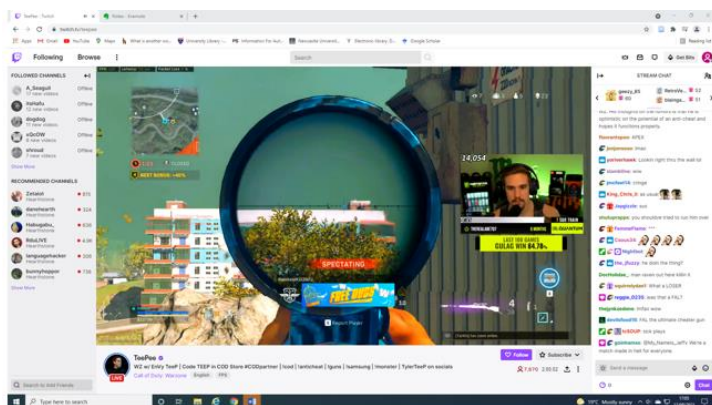


Figure 2: Screenshots of Twitch streams of a) *Call of Duty: Warzone*, b) *Fortnite*, and c) *Apex: Legends*.

This part of fieldwork covered 28 streams and 26 streamers, the majority of which were centred on *Call of Duty: Warzone*, and the remainder on the other popular Battle Royale videogames; *Apex: Legends*, and *Fortnite* - with images for a stream of each game shown above (Figure 2). *Call of Duty: Warzone* was chosen as the main focus, because the eponymous series of first-person shooters is one of the most well-known ‘mainstream’ military-themed videogame franchises. Indeed, *Call of Duty* and other commercial military-themed shooters are highlighted by scholars for reproducing hegemonic geopolitical discourses and for promoting militaristic and masculine values (e.g. Blackburn 2018; Bos 2018; Power 2007), but again there is a lack of engagement with the everyday contexts of their play and the streaming of such games - hence this study. As noted earlier in this thesis, *Apex: Legends* and *Fortnite* are just as popular— if not more popular in the case of *Fortnite* - than *Call of Duty: Warzone*. Despite this, they have received little to no attention from political geographers and many others - due to the fact that these are not explicitly related to the military - a ‘gap’ that this research in part looks to fill in thinking about the wider assemblage of popular culture. *Fortnite* is a Battle Royale videogame that is a survival game with construction elements (depending on mode), has colourful, cartoony graphics and is especially popular among younger audiences. While somewhat straddling between the two in terms of aesthetics, *Apex: Legends* is a Battle Royale hero-shooter in which players take control of pre-made characters with distinctive abilities and work as part of a duo and trio. Thus, while the main focus of this study was on *Call of Duty: Warzone*, I wanted to compare and contrast how in turn these games led to

different viewing, streaming and gaming experiences. For instance, as *Fortnite* is perceived as being more 'child-friendly', streamers of the game tend not to use strong language in their broadcasts, unlike in streams of the other two games. Examining Twitch broadcasts of all three of these Battle Royale videogames enabled me to explore the extent to which these different games affected the stream assemblage and in turn, the wider geopolitical, cultural and social dimensions of Battle Royale videogame streaming as part of a popular cultural assemblage.

This was a purposive sample that selected mainly English-speaking popular streamers with thousands of viewers, since they tended to run the most active and 'eventful' everyday streams where there were a multiplicity of interactions between streamers and viewers. However, some smaller streamers were also included to try to encompass the full range of the Twitch community formed around *Call of Duty: Warzone* and other Battle Royale videogames. Furthermore, the majority of streamers were white males in their early 20s - mirroring both the core player and streamer demographic for this genre of videogames (Eled 2023). Nonetheless, efforts were made to explore the broadcasts of female streamers and those of different ethnicities and nationalities to explore how the identity of streamers may influence the emergent stream assemblage, contextualising this in relation to the racialised and gendered dimensions of Hardt and Negri's (2000, 2004) "Empire". In focusing on these aspects, I extend on the work of scholars like Payne (2010) and Taylor (2011) in exploring how broadcasts of Battle Royale videogames were co-constitutive of militarised, hyper-masculine and homosocial technocultures. As part of this - and as discussed in more detail in Chapter 7 - there was engagement with affects of humour and toxicity and how these mutually shaped these ludic assemblages. While more broadly speaking, I could emphasise the banal but enlivening nature of Twitch streams in further considering how these games have become socially embedded in everyday life and the ways in which they animate and subvert "Empire".



- Now spectating as player who killed him
- Jumped into the stream as it was partway through a game so not completely up to speed with what is happening
- Not too upset at dying- just "unlucky"- more focused on the skill level of enemy player calling him elite

Tom Shrimplin (PGR)
Through years of experience- less affected by affects

Figure 3: Image of an annotated screenshot from the Twitch stream ethnography.

As can be seen in *Figure 3*, in conducting this method I took notes and screenshots of moments, observations and interactions to capture what was happening during the Twitch stream (Taylor 2018). As Boelstorff et al. (2012) explain screenshots are unobtrusive and can be particularly convenient in researching popular cultural artefacts or aspects of movement in space. Moreover, they help in illustrating observations, showing the appearance of the digital field site, as well as jogging memories in reminding researchers about a significant event or issue. Furthermore, these screenshots made it easier to account for the digital interfaces that co-constitute the ludic assemblages of Twitch streams (Ash 2018) which is important when considering how Twitch exists as an economic platform that enables the immaterial labour of streamers – a subject I further discuss in the next chapter. Through the use of screenshots in my data collection and thesis, I sought to try to present rather than represent what had happened in these ludic assemblages, in a similar vein to other presentational methods that are used when enacting an ethos of engagement (Anderson and McFarlane 2011; Anderson et al. 2012a). Although as I later acknowledge in Chapter 10 the thesis format makes this difficult.

I first viewed the stream 'live' examining the streamers themselves and their playbour, including their interactions in-game and interactions with viewers, as well as the ongoing stream chats. One or two days later, I would then re-watch the stream through the video on-demand function, here adding additional notes and screenshots, taking account of further points of interest that were missed or misunderstood during the first viewing. Re-watching

the stream video also enabled me to pause, rewind and replay particular moments, so that I could then better comprehend the dynamics and complexities of the Twitch stream assemblages. This capability was especially valuable when there were intense, lively moments of gameplay where it was difficult to observe the Twitch chat and gameplay simultaneously. Additionally, as I frequently reflected when doing Twitch stream ethnography, I often found myself immersed in the streams, in for instance wanting the streamer to win and laughing at certain moments. Thus, re-watching these streams and being able to stop at certain moments in effect acted as a 'circuit-breaker' for the affective intensities and gave me more time to reflect on moments of action from a more detached perspective. Nevertheless, a small minority of streamers had not recorded their streams, meaning in those instances I had to read over the existing notes and screenshots before using my memory to help fill in the gaps. After this, I wrote further comments linking it to themes, ideas and debates in the literature. The notes for these gaming stream ethnographies were treated as 'living documents' with additional comments being added during fieldwork as new themes and ideas emerged. These documents were then later coded for analysis to look for common themes and patterns around the social, material and affective dimensions of these ludic assemblages.

4.5 Gaming Venue Ethnography



Figure 4: Image of the gaming lounge. Source: (The CTRL Pad [@The_CTRL_Pad] 2020).

Gaming cafes, also commonly known as internet cafes, cyber-cafes and gaming lounges, are establishments where a person can pay to use consoles and/or computers with access to the Internet and the newest videogame titles. A significant physical, socio-cultural space for the gaming scene (Gosling and Crawford 2011), as highlighted earlier in this chapter, gaming cafes have become a key site of study for game scholars exploring the practices of gaming fandoms. Yet, unlike other indoor spaces for children and young people's play such as youth clubs (Skelton 2000), there has been a lack of engagement with these spaces within geography. Thus, in addition to examining the social and cultural dimensions of the space as a site for young people's leisure, this research follows Payne (2010) in investigating the degree to which these spaces are co-constitutive of ludic war through the playing of military-themed games, as well as more generally how geopolitics 'plays out' in the everyday context of this space.

'In-person' ethnography involved conducting 11 visits to a gaming lounge in the North of England between September 2021 and December 2021. These visits were undertaken at various times on different days of the week during this period to see how the number and

demographic of customers may shape the social dynamics of the space. For instance, I found that weekends tended to be a lot busier than weekdays. There were previously plans to visit and conduct participant observation at a gaming arena in a city location in the North of England, however unfortunately due to the Covid-19 pandemic this original field site was closed in July 2021. When in the gaming lounge, I carried out participant observation, playing games and acting as a normal customer, whilst also writing notes on my phone during breaks in my own play to record what was occurring in the space during that visit. This included giving details on:

I could also see that all the Halloween decorations were now up in the gaming lounge, such as the spider webs and Halloween stickers. In the background I could hear some random pop music playing.

- Ethnographic Excerpt

- a) The physical architecture and cultural aesthetics of the gaming lounge in terms of how it structured play and was oriented towards consumption – as shown above

Later I could see two new customers on FIFA, who before playing were talking to someone on the PS4 next to them in the sofa group area- I don't think they were all together though, which was unusual to see as normally people stay together in their own groups

- Ethnographic Excerpt

- b) The social dynamics of the gaming lounge – noting down the demographics, busyness and interactions between different groups of people in the space – as shown above.

There was also another guy playing what looked like a shooter game on the PC next to me- but I'm not sure what time they came in as I was absorbed playing Apex on the PC, especially since I had my headphones in.

- Ethnographic Excerpt

- c) The affective and technological dimensions of the gaming lounge – thinking about how it enabled immersive experiences for customers, including myself – as shown above

As shown in these three short extracts, these field notes took the form of both general observations and particular stories or anecdotes, in exploring the space and both the ludic and/or social assemblages that emerged there. Following this, they were later transferred over from my phone to my laptop, where they were then expanded on in further detail, here including personal reflections and further observations. After this period of doing physical, 'in-person' ethnography was over, all field notes were then collated together and coded to look for recurring themes and commonalities, as I considered the various geopolitical, social, cultural and economic dimensions of this space.

Although there have been other more creative ways of doing ethnography on play such as through audio-visual methods (e.g. Bos 2016, Taylor 2011, Woodyer and Carter 2018) this was made difficult, because it was a private space that would have required permission from the owners of the gaming lounge. Furthermore, as it was frequently used by children and teenagers this would have been impractical and unethical, as I did not receive ethical approval to move beyond standard participant observation in this space. Besides, for already discussed conceptual reasons, my research was not focusing on children but rather young people over the age of 18 and more generally the space of the gaming lounge itself. Subsequently, in negotiating the ethics of doing fieldwork in this space I purposefully did not interact with children under the age of 18. I made sure I had permission to conduct research in the gaming lounge by members of staff during visits there and they even agreed to display my recruitment poster for interview participants. Moreover, I made it clear that I was willing to answer questions that they had about my research - which happened on a few occasions - and they were willing to answer some general questions, such as when the gaming cafe tended to be busy. I would have also disclosed my identity and my intentions as a researcher to any member of the public who interacted with me there. However, interestingly this did not occur, which I assume is largely due to the immersive qualities of (game)play and not wanting to interrupt each other's play in this space. In some ways, this did limit the data collected from participant

observation, as I could not fully account for other people's thoughts and experiences, but it revealed insights into the immersive qualities of videogaming and the gaming lounge. Additionally, the specificities of the space and the affective dimensions of gaming prevented a complete view of the entire gaming lounge and made it difficult to become fully immersed in the field. Nevertheless, as outlined in more detail in Chapter 5, conducting ethnography at the gaming lounge allowed me to explore how videogaming has become embedded in everyday life, the banal ways through which the geopolitical emerges, and the broader relations between play and geopolitics and ultimately bringing attention to a space that has previously escaped geographical enquiry.

4.6 Semi-structured Interviews

In my research I conducted semi-structured interviews with young gamers to gain insights into the ways in which young adults engage with military-themed Battle Royale videogames - in particular, *Call of Duty: Warzone* - and think about (geo)-politics in their everyday lives. As noted above semi-structured interviews have become a commonly used method in political geography, and perhaps most pertinently have been used by scholars like Bos (2016, 2018a) to explore the ways in which the consumption, interpretation and experience of *Call of Duty* videogames is entangled with dominant geopolitical and militaristic imaginings of the world. These semi-structured interviews were conducted online through the Voice over Internet Protocol (VOIP) technology Zoom, as it allowed for video and audio communication, thus enabling face-to-face interviews to be conducted in a computer-mediated environment. Moreover, participants were given the choice between the interview being audio recorded, video recorded or neither, to ensure they felt comfortable. Online interviews via Zoom offered several advantages in that they eliminated the need to travel and the associated costs, helped the interviewer and participant feel more comfortable by providing a neutral yet personal location for the interview to take place, and allowed for easier recording and start to the transcription process (Hanna 2012; Hine 2016; Longhurst 2016). Although these were originally planned to be online, it became a necessity due to the Covid-19 restrictions in the UK during the majority of the fieldwork process. While unequal access to the Internet is typically a disadvantage of online interviews in limiting the pool of participants, this issue was negated, as interviewees already required access to the Internet to play Battle Royale videogames and engage in online gaming communities. However, conducting these interviews

online came with the risk of technical issues, such as with the audio and lag, meaning that the discussion with participants could sometimes be interrupted, unclear or even completely inaudible in parts (Boelstorff et al. 2012).

A convenience sampling approach was used, specifically looking for young people over the age of 18 who live in the UK and play Battle Royale videogames like *Call of Duty: Warzone*. I recruited participants by advertising on the social media websites Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, as well as at the gaming lounge in the North of England where I conducted participant observation (the recruitment poster can be seen in Appendix A). Both displaying this poster and word of mouth via both personal and academic networks helped in finding potential participants, with all of these interviewees being either friends or friends of friends. Importantly, I sought to recruit young people not because they are more likely to play videogames (in fact see Quandt et al. 2009 for an excellent study on elderly or ‘grey gamers’). Instead this demographic was chosen because young people’s play is typically cast in negative terms and so they are often the subject of moral panic – a theme I outline further in Chapter 9. Furthermore, as this research seeks to add to the literature focusing on young people as geopolitical agents, by looking at their engagements with popular culture (as discussed further in Chapter 6) especially since they are often perceived as being disengaged with politics (see Skelton 2012). Additionally, although there was a lower age limit of 18 for both ethical and practical reasons, there was no set upper age limit. Again, this is in recognition that youth is an ambiguous and slippery category (Ansell 2004; Hopkins 2010; Valentine 2003), and that increasingly people are vacillating between childhood, youth and adulthood (c.f. Smith and Mills 2019). Nevertheless, all seven interviewees here were between the ages of 25 and 29, as were many Twitch streamers and other people interacting in both online and physical gaming spaces. Parts of interviews were spent talking about the differences between ourselves and both older and younger generations, offering useful insights into the instability of this age category. In fact, being at the same age as my interviewees meant we had similar engagements with videogames and other forms of popular culture that we had all ‘grown up with’ helped ease the conversation - a point I return to later when I highlight how I was critically reflexive over my positionality. Likewise, the majority of the interviewees were from working-class or middle-class backgrounds and were from the North of England, although they were now based throughout the UK. Finally, many interviewees had also been or were at university and all were

in some form of employment, although there were differences in household status, with for example some still living at their parents' homes and others now living in their own accommodation with their partners. A table describing the demographics and background information of all these interviewees can be seen in Appendix B.

There were no other criteria for participants to take part in an interview, as I intended to recruit a range of participants with various levels of engagement, identities and politics to understand the various interactions young people have with these games, the gaming community and politics. Interviewees had various levels of engagement with military-themed games and/or Battle Royale games throughout their lives, with this time spent videogaming even influencing the choice of career and/or university degree for a few of the interviewees. Nevertheless, at the time of interview most considered themselves as casual gamers - again showing how gaming identities are fluid and diffuse in nature (Gosling and Crawford 2011). Efforts were also made to recruit young people who live in the UK that play Battle Royales competitively and/or are Twitch 'streamers', by contacting them via their social media pages and/or email. However, such attempts were unsuccessful with little to no response from these groups. I suggest that this is because there were no reimbursements given to interviewees for ethical reasons (and since costs of travel were negated due to these being conducted online) which meant I could not compensate streamers for time that would possibly be spent conducting playbour. As such in total, there were seven interviewees, six of them being white, straight men (the other being a white straight woman), thus mirroring the core demographic for this genre of videogames (Bos 2018a) and in turn indirectly highlighting the gendered dimensions of both gaming and "Empire" (Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter 2009).

Prior to the interview, participants were given an information sheet (Appendix C) that detailed the structure and purpose of these interviews, before sending over a form to obtain informed consent if they wished to take part in this research (Appendix D). Moreover, all interviews were recorded through Zoom and then transcribed, with anonymity being assured in the transcription process. All participants have been given pseudonyms. Once completed and then transcribed, the interview transcripts were coded through NVIVO, with there also being an option from the consent form that allowed participants to edit and review their interview transcript- although in the end none wished to make any changes. The collected data, both

the audio/video files and transcriptions, were stored and secured in a location that is only accessible to me to help safeguard participants' privacy.

The interview questions used here were designed to gain greater insights into young people's experiences around military-themed Battle Royale games and politics. While they tended to follow the three-part order below, the discussions often jumped between each set and focused on issues and topics that participants engaged with more and took on average 45 minutes. A full list of these questions can be seen in Appendix E. Firstly, there was a set of questions examining the participants' background and biography as a gamer. These questions were aimed at learning about participants' everyday engagements with video games - in particular, military-themed Battle Royale games like *Call of Duty: Warzone* - and the gaming scene. Questions included;

- How long have you been playing videogames?
- When did you start playing Battle Royale videogames?
- Why do you think these games are popular?

These questions helped create a rapport with participants and eased them into the interview process, with many participants here talking about their gaming history - often reaching far back into childhood. As such, they provided a greater understanding of participants' interactions with videogames and the gaming community across different spaces and times, as well as offering insights into the ways in which these games have become socially embedded in their everyday lives.

A second set of questions looked at interviewees' political participation and engagement, their opinions, views and thoughts around national and global politics, as well as more specifically in relation to these games and the gaming community. Questions included;

- Do you follow, or have you followed, politics?
- What do you think about the links between these types of videogames and violence in young people?
- Do you think these games have political messages?

As such, these questions sought to explore how young people engage with and think about politics within their everyday lives as well as more specifically in relation to videogaming, with a focus on issues around violence, addiction, and discrimination in these games. Additionally, interviews here often extended into wider discussions around social media and digital culture. This underscores why; a) individuals should be understood as multiple media users (Taylor 2018), and b) why popular culture, as Dittmer (2015a) argues, should be understood as an assemblage rather than a 'thing', since player's geopolitical subjectivities are in part shaped by their interactions with various elements of popular culture – as will be shown throughout this thesis. Altogether then, these questions gave a better appreciation for the ways in which young people encounter, negotiate and engage with (geo)-politics in and outside of gaming spaces, as well as the social effects of videogaming on young gamers' everyday lives.

Thirdly, there was a set of questions focusing on the affective, emotive, and embodied aspects of both playing virtual war in these games and interacting with the community. Questions included;

- What parts of these games are the most enjoyable?
- What about moments of frustration, or boredom?
- What does it feel like interacting with other players?

These questions were targeted towards understanding the experiential aspects of playing Battle Royale games, and in gaining insights as to how an array of different elements co-constitute these emerging ludic assemblages and produce certain affects from enjoyment to anger. Although interviewees found it difficult to clearly articulate and/or fully recall their experiences of playing virtual war, an issue noted by Bos (2016), these interviews still offered evocative insights into the aesthetic and immersive qualities of the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames. Furthermore, the option to conduct alternative ways of doing interviews such as gaming interviews, were made difficult practically due to Covid-19 restrictions. Yet, as Hitchings (2012) argues, talk-based methods such as interviews can still provide valuable understandings of individual's practices, as they critically reflect on their everyday routines, as shown in my research by interviewees' willingness to here discuss their gaming histories and habits. Additionally, the use of conversational humour and laughter helped participants to articulate practices, behaviours and habits that might otherwise be deemed strange or

awkward (Browne 2016). Overall, these semi-structured interviews offered deep insights into some of the ways in which young people experience and engage with Battle Royale games and politics, helping shed light on how these games have become socially embedded in everyday life.

4.7 Auto-ethnographic Methods: Reflexivity, Positionality and Ethics

As discussed in the previous chapter, doing ludic assemblage involves a sense of openness, reflexivity and playfulness in attending to the immanence and potentialities of these liminal, experimental space-times (Anderson and McFarlane 2011). As such, this research draws heavily on auto-ethnographic approaches. Yet, while such reflections on the fieldwork process have become increasingly common in other sub-disciplines of geography (e.g. Dittmer and Waterton 2019), as Woon (2013) points out, critical geopolitics and political geography are lagging in the initiation of such a critical agenda - except for a few notable exceptions such as Sidaway (2009) and Megoran (2006). Subsequently, Woon in drawing on research, violence and terrorism in the Philippines, illustrates how thinking critically about the ways in which emotions are intertwined in the conduct of fieldwork enable a greater appreciation of the unpredictable nature of the research process and the wider contexts/agencies that shape research outcomes and knowledges produced. Likewise, work in critical military geographies has also acknowledged the need to be critically reflexive about positionality, especially around processes of militarisation and militarism. Namely, Rech and Williams (2016) have deployed ethnographic and auto-ethnographic approaches respectively, to engage with the spatialities and materialities of the spectacular 'event' of the air show, and its role and place in processes of militarisation. In doing so, they contextualise their accounts in relation to their positionalities as researchers. Specifically, Williams discusses how her long-lasting personal interest in air shows together with their academic interest in air power projection complicates her positionality as a researcher. Pertinently here, Rech and Williams (2016: 276) argue that an auto-ethnographic approach offers such a useful methodological approach for engagements with military events since;

“Rather than having to negotiate around personal feelings, and knowledge of the subject matter, through ignoring them or intellectualising them, it enables us to

recognise and take ownership of them in a critically reflexive way that facilitates an exploration of their impact on our data collection experiences.”

Furthermore, while Rech and Williams describe how they position themselves as critical military researchers, they also acknowledge the need to be critically reflexive on becoming too enchanted with the military spectacle of the air show in their ethnographic engagements. As a corrective to geopolitical accounts that replicate the disembodied gaze of classical geopolitics, as well as to avoid becoming too enchanted with the spectacle of ludic war, I therefore thoroughly embed myself within the research and consider myself as one of many actants in these ludic assemblages. More specifically, I sought to be open and honest about my experiences in doing fieldwork on the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames, since my political subjectivities are in part shaped by my bodily interactions with the wider assemblage of popular culture (Caso 2018; Dittmer 2015a). For instance, throughout doing Twitch stream ethnography, I frequently noted how I found myself immersed or ‘enchanted’ (see Woodyer and Geoghegan 2013) with streamer’s gameplay, laughing at some jokes or moments in gameplay. By exploring these slippages in my identity as a researcher instead of ignoring these moments, it meant I could offer greater insights into the affective qualities of these ludic assemblages.

Been a very interesting and fun part of doing fieldwork, being acquainted with Twitch which I have learned in the past

While I've found the humour of many streams funny, it is admittedly quite crude and homosocial in nature- but there is also a lot of irony and self-referential, knowing humour here too

I am somewhat concerned by the 'casual' racism/sexism etc. that can be found in some streams but I think perhaps what is more worrying is the creepy harassment of female streams by men and conspiracies- especially around Covid

The last two streams have been positive and full of Christmas generosity - its interesting to think how much gaming can allow for connection to bring people together when social media can be so divisive - perhaps games, or more specifically streaming sites

like Twitch are the real social media?- or here I as write one month later after reading Woodyer and Geoghan (2013)- a feeling of being re-enchanted

- Excerpt from research diary

While I carried out an auto-ethnographic sensibility throughout fieldwork, like through the inclusion of specific personal thoughts and feelings when conducting both stream and 'in-person' ethnography, more comprehensive reflections were written in the form of a research diary (Horton 2021) - such as those shown above. These notes were written up intermittently throughout the fieldwork period and covered a range of issues, such as general recurring observations and the practicalities of using various research methods. Moreover, here I wrote personal accounts of the affective and emotional qualities of doing ludic assemblage, charting the various feelings of excitement, immersion, nostalgia, uneasiness, disgust and enchantment/disenchantment that I had throughout the fieldwork process. As such this research was founded on the notion that auto-ethnography exists as a continuum, dissolving to varying degrees the boundary between authors and objects of representation (Butz and Besio 2009). This is apparent in how my level of 'insiderness' was dependent on the spaces where I was carrying out fieldwork, as while I have visited and interacted with many digital gaming spaces, I am a newcomer to physical gaming venues. Additionally, I needed to think of the impact my identity has on fieldwork, not just in terms of being a white, male, queer, young academic from a working-class background based in the North East of England, but also my oscillating subjectivity as a researcher and a gamer according to both method and space of fieldwork and therefore how that may shape these ludic assemblages and thus data collection. Just as Folkes (2022) writes, it is important to not just provide a descriptive 'shopping list' of positionality characteristics and note whether it is shared or not with participants. Instead, scholars should recognise the relational and transient nature of positionality and consider how it continually changes across social contexts and interactions, in order to be truly reflexive in research. In fact, I found that by fully acknowledging my shifting, fluid positionality I was able to rely on my knowledge both as a gamer (since childhood) and popular geopolitical researcher and to use that to my advantage in the data collection process, contextualising academic concepts into gaming language and vice versa. This can be seen in an interview excerpt below:

Me: *Yeah. So you wouldn't say that there is much of a link between say like violence and like young people, like younger generations and then violence in those games? You wouldn't say that there is a link, between those two necessarily?*

Wes: *No like I see it like as... like you are tuned in but I never- it seems like such a big gap between that and real life. Like I could never, link them at all. I don't know like you're still- I think, maybe one link that could be is that, is like if you're getting stressed by a game, then you get anger as a result. But not because of like what you're seeing in the game, just because of the effect it's having on you, you know I wouldn't feel like, if I was shooting people in a game and I've got any more, anger or malice towards people. It would more be like if I kept losing and losing and losing I'd be annoyed as a result.*

Me: *Right yeah.*

Wes: *But yeah that could be FIFA that could be you know- I'd say, if anything, honestly, like if a game was going to make me angry or violent it would probably be FIFA, because that game is really stressful. Whereas like I could go into Call of Duty and shoot people for hours and be losing but like I'm never really stressed out by it, oh.*

Researcher: *Yeah, I've always said that I don't think there's much difference between getting shot and killed and in a game, in like Call of Duty, it's like very similar to getting 'blue-shelled' in Mario Kart.*

Wes: *[laugh] Yeah.*

Researcher: *That's how I've always thought about it, would you think the same there-
?*

Wes: *-Yes, yeah I mean yeah, yeah, Mario Kart's another one. I'd be much more kind of- you know, encouraged much more anger in me then shooting people- It's, I don't know for me it doesn't feel like it's the, the kind of content of the game itself more so than*

just how it makes you feel because of you know, the frustration, or whatever of losing or you know however, it kind of- however you interact with it.

Here in talking about the immersive qualities of Battle Royale videogames with participants in interviews and whether these games caused anger and frustration, while taking due care to not lead them, I compared this to how it felt being ‘blue-shelled’² in the racing game *Mario Kart* as a useful frame of reference for Wes to articulate an answer to the question. Another time I use my positionality as a gamer and a researcher to my advantage is when I sought to understand ‘tilt’, a gaming slang term used to describe the feeling of frustration and rage that often arises from toxic or deviant behaviour carried out by other players, as an affect of these ludic assemblages. Altogether, this research illustrates how carrying an auto-ethnographic sensibility when conducting assemblage ethnography can be useful in gauging the affective intensities of the assemblage, as well as more broadly help researchers be critically reflexive over how they themselves are part of the assemblage(s) under study (Ghoddousi and Page 2020).

4.8 Concluding Remarks

This chapter has discussed the various qualitative methods that were conducted under the label of assemblage ethnography to critically examine and reflect on how young people are co-constitutive of the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and live-streams. In outlining the qualitative, ethnographic and participatory methodologies associated with the geographies of children, youth and family and research on gamers/audiences, this chapter has synthesised these approaches together in attending to the ‘more-than-human’ relations that emerge through young people’s everyday practices of Battle Royale videogaming and live-streaming. Specifically, it has understood young gamers as assemblages in and of themselves, and in an assemblage ethnography explore their relations with these ludic assemblages, popular cultural assemblages and the other geopolitical assemblages that co-constitute their everyday lives. It has also explored the fluid, processual and dispersed nature of fieldwork, as has become particularly apparent during the Covid-19 pandemic and how through assemblage

² In the Mario Kart series of games a blue shell is a power-up that when used, aims directly at the racer in first place, stopping them on impact.

ethnography I was able to negotiate the impacts of it on data collection. Subsequently, this chapter has discussed how online semi-structured interviews have helped examine how young people experience and engage with military-themed Battle Royale games and politics as part of their everyday lives. It has outlined how I engaged in participant observation in the space of the gaming lounge to explore its social, affective and cultural dimensions. Similarly, it has described how Twitch stream ethnography has been used to account for the ludic assemblages that emerge through practices of livestreaming Battle Royale gameplay in the context of digital culture. Finally, it has reviewed how auto-ethnographic methods have allowed me to be critically reflexive over how I become embedded in and co-constitutive of these ludic assemblages, but also use my subjectivity as both a gamer and researcher to my advantage in considering their various dimensions. Altogether, this approach of assemblage ethnography enabled rich insights into the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and live-streams, which will now be expanded on in the following five empirically-based chapters that comprise the main body of this thesis.

Chapter 5: The Everyday Geographies of Battle Royale Videogames and Streams

As Hardt and Negri (2000, 2004) write, under the totalising biopolitical regime of “Empire”, capital has extended its reach to a global scale, with war becoming embedded into the culture of everyday life. As such, this chapter will outline how a number of actors, scales and spaces co-constitute, intersect and emerge through the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and streams, emphasising the complex geographies of ludic war/violence and thus how “Empire” emerges in the everyday spaces of young gamers. Firstly, in attending to the geographical dimensions of these ludic assemblages, this chapter will overview the literature on spaces and places of media, before then detailing the various spaces that were investigated through fieldwork. Secondly, this chapter considers the space of the home and its geopolitical dimensions, engaging with how domestic spaces are involved in processes of media consumption and production. Thirdly, this chapter moves on to the socio-cultural space of the gaming lounge as a site for young people and others’ leisure, with attention paid to its geopolitical dimensions as a space of surveillance. Fourthly, this chapter examines the Twitch stream as a social space and digital interface that facilitates streamer’s playbour, illustrating its agencies in enabling the emergent, ludic assemblages of Battle Royale streams. Finally, this chapter considers the wider geographies, materialities and agencies of the Internet, focusing on how it territorialises and deterritorialises these ludic assemblages. In charting the multiple physical and digital spaces of ludic war, in addition to the trans-scalar relations emerging between these sites through ludic assemblage, this chapter will offer a greater understanding of the geographical extent of the ‘globalised’ biopolitical regime of “Empire”.

5.1 Geographies of Ludic War/Violence

As discussed in Chapter 2, following 9/11 there has been a shift in the media from ‘spectacular war’ to ‘interactive war’, exemplified by the prevalence of military-themed videogames that enable citizens to virtually play and experience war (Stahl 2010). Thus, ludic war should be understood as arising through complex assemblages of human and non-human interactions across a number of spaces and scales. Subsequently, this research uses assemblage ethnography to explore the range of processes, spaces and relations that constitute these ludic assemblages that emerge through and are embedded in young people’s everyday lives. Significantly, these ludic assemblages can be understood as playful events or encounters

between various texts, objects, bodies and practices that bring together the everyday and the geopolitical (Ash 2010; Woodyer and Carter 2020). A key example of this kind of work comes from Bos (2018a) who considers the playing of military-themed videogames as an event of geopolitical consumption, specifically noting the social, material, and spatial contexts in which popular geopolitics is encountered in everyday life. This chapter will build on this scholarship further in exploring the ways in which ludic war is now also an event of geopolitical (re)production and circulation through examining the heterogeneous actants, spaces and relations that emerge through practices of livestreaming and spectating, as well as that of videogaming.

Thinking about the geographies of media production, circulation and consumption links with the work of Adams (2009) who usefully identifies four ways in which media relate to space and place. The first category of 'media in space' refers to the geographic distribution of media infrastructure around the world where practices of production, consumption and circulation take place. For (Battle Royale) videogames, this would include spaces like the game studios, homes and gaming cafes, in addition to the internet infrastructure that enables online play, such as servers. 'Spaces in media' refer to the topological social space produced through mediation. Most relevantly, this includes social media platforms like Twitch. Indeed, although these websites physically exist on a server somewhere, they also exist as digital spaces where people can meet and interact with one another. The category of 'places in media' refers to representations of places, such as the digital landscapes of ludic war produced in military-themed videogames, which as outlined in the literature review chapter are found to (re)produce hegemonic geopolitical imaginations. Additionally, as Dittmer and Dodds (2013) remark, these artificial place images themselves become co-constitutive of that place through their relational engagements. This can be seen in how British print media coverage of the now-renamed Royal Wootton Bassett as a space of collective grieving and commemoration for British military personnel killed in action has resulted in the militarisation of this civilian space (Jenkins et al. 2012). The final category of 'media in place' pays attention to the ways in which media are embedded and permitted in various places (or not) according to laws and customs, such as in places where there is strict media censorship. For instance, Battle Royale videogames such as *Fortnite* and *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds* have been prohibited in China due to their violent and vulgar content; being deemed contrary to 'Chinese socialist

values'. While worldwide, there are often age restrictions on games, including Battle Royale videogames. In the UK, *Call of Duty: Warzone* is rated as 18+ due to blood and gore, strong language, suggestive themes, use of drugs and violence. Similarly, *Apex: Legends* is classified as 16+ because of its sustained depictions of violence against human characters and moderate violence. Whereas *Fortnite* has been given a 12+ rating due to containing frequent scenes of mild violence. It is important then to explore the various spaces and places of Battle Royale videogames and streams that are constituted through social relations across multiple scales to better understand the geographical dimensions of these emergent ludic assemblages (Dittmer and Dodds 2013).

Another important study of note here is Payne's (2010) work on 'ludic war' in which he explores how gamers relate to each other while engaging in the co-constitutive, liminal experience in the collaborative and competitive play space of a commercial LAN gaming centre. As Payne (2010: 211) explains, 'ludic war' is "a contingent social activity that is symbolically militarised through the use of specific games", which through its liminality has enabled "power hierarchies in these mediated worlds of virtual war to be reified and replayed in the real world". Specifically, he elucidates how playing war in this homosocial space has led to a highly gendered discourse that privileges domination to egalitarianism, with players performing according to a set of presumed norms. Here exchanges between gamers are seen as a means of policing one another's social transgressions, with different responses to infractions of gaming etiquette and more general social violations, which Payne categorises as playful, tolerable and inviolable. As Payne writes, playful transgressions occurred as gamers sought to humorously irritate or provoke one another in virtual and real-world sparring matches, with such exchanges understood to be joking by all parties, being part of the communal gaming experience. Tolerated transgressions were the vulgar conversations and otherwise offensive (e.g. racist, sexist, homophobic) jabs targeted towards absent demographics not generally heard or sanctioned in public settings, but were nevertheless accepted since the majority of players in the gaming lounge were young, straight, white men. Finally, there were the inviolable transgressions, expressions that were considered to be a direct affront to the in-group or contravened well-established play principles. These ranged from forms of cheating like 'screen peaking' to not following the 'proper' ludic war protocols, such as using 'wrong' weapons like missile launchers. Thus, Payne illustrates how publicly

performed ludic war emerges through this nexus of militarism, technology and male gamers to structure and regulate the playing experience in this emergent, highly gendered, classed and heteronormative space of the gaming centre. This project builds on these ideas further to explore how ludic war, as well as more broadly other forms of prosaic violence, can emerge through the playing and streaming of Battle Royale videogames across a number of spaces and scales. In doing so, it will also illustrate the inherent tensions within “Empire” as it is co-constituted and destabilised through the multitude.

5.2 The Home

As Brickell (2012) argues, the home is a significant space for the performance, imaginings and contestation of geopolitical identities and subjectivities. As she elucidates, ‘the home’ can be theorised both as physical place and as a geopolitical imaginary that may simultaneously signify the nation, the neighbourhood or just one’s streets. In engaging with how the home is co-constitutive of geopolitics, Brickell’s paper links to broader work by feminist geographers that has attended to notions of intimacy in relation to violence and war. For instance, Pain (2015) has argued that domestic violence and international warfare are both part of a single complex of violence, with intimate war here emerging at multiple scales and being spatially reconfigured through processes of globalization, colonization, race, class and gender. Likewise, the home is increasingly becoming a key space of play, especially in Western societies, as young people’s use of public and outdoor spaces become associated with risk (Woodyer et al. 2016). Linking this together and as referred to earlier, Woodyer and Carter (2020) analyse the domestication of geopolitics through practices of play, here using the example of ‘war toys’. As they explain, the domestication of these ‘war toys’ works simultaneously in bringing the ‘wildness’ of the international ‘war of terror’ into the domestic life and practices of children and enabling a playful encounter that transforms or ‘tames’ this wildness. Building on this work, Bos (2018a) outlines how ‘the home’ has become a site of popular geopolitical consumption through practices of videogaming, whilst also shedding light on the ways in which domestic spaces shape geopolitical encounters with popular culture and the media. Specifically, Bos discusses how interactions with these virtual worlds thereby become premised on the micro-politics of domestic life, as personal rooms like the bedroom become the preferred environment, due to being free from interruptions and interferences. This is illustrated by Johnny below:

Johnny: *Yeah so we live in, we just moved to a bungalow that's big and we've only got one telly so I play in the lounge and in our old flat, we had a sort of, you'll know you've lived in apartments, we had a lounge leading onto a kitchen. So the telly was in the lounge with the dining table on the far side, so it kind of took over the room to be honest with you, when you're playing. Um, so now it's kind of got its own little room it's a bit less stressful and a little bit less shouty.*

Johnny talks about how moving from a small studio flat to a larger home means he is now able to play in a separate room set aside for gaming, and thus avoid interpersonal conflict with his partner. Strikingly, as I come to further in the next chapter, the fact that the console has got “its own little room” where Johnny can take on the role of the gamer, demonstrates how this identity becomes significant in particular spaces (Gosling and Crawford 2011). Likewise, Johnny's domestic situation supports Bos' (2018a) argument on the wider gendered social power relations of media consumption, in that videogaming, especially for military-themed shooters and Battle Royales like *Warzone*, is largely considered a masculine leisure activity. Additionally, it hints at how - as I come to later in this section - videogaming is disruptive of patterns of social reproduction.

“The notion of watching a Twitch stream in the office feels rather strange, as I normally watch streams at home on just my laptop for fun rather than at work with the two screens- yes my research is purposively designed to be playful, but it is a rather odd feeling of discomfort which I suppose reflects on my liminal position as a both a viewer/gamer and a researcher, but also reflects the fact that this is happening in a more public space rather than a private space where I can become more engrossed in the stream without looking “silly” for lack of a better word”

- Excerpt from field diary

Furthermore, as seen from the above reflection from my field diary, I acknowledged how watching streams is a private, leisure activity that takes place in the comfort of my own home, which explained why I felt self-conscious and not quite so immersed in the spectacle of ludic war when doing Twitch stream ethnography in an office space. This demonstrates the ways in which spatial arrangements can either stimulate or inhibit the emergent affect of immersion. Specifically, domestic settings can be more readily configured to facilitate a private and more

immersive experience for the watching of streams and playing of videogames, such as through closing blinds or turning off lights.

It is also important to consider how the home has become a space of work for streamers in the broadcasting of Twitch streams and doing other related practices of playbour. These streams can be broadcast from a range of different domestic spaces, including living rooms, kitchens and bedrooms, which can be seen by viewers if the streamer chooses to operate a face camera. As Ruberg and Lark (2021) posit, wherever in the home it takes place, livestreaming is an intimate, embodied, gendered and arguably erotic practice. As they discuss, many streamers situate themselves in front of displays that show off a variety of personal items and videogame paraphernalia. In furnishing this space with items that represent themselves, streamers are able to exhibit their personalities and differentiate themselves from those streaming similar content, while also helping to engender a sense of intimacy and facilitate the production of para-social bonds with their viewers.



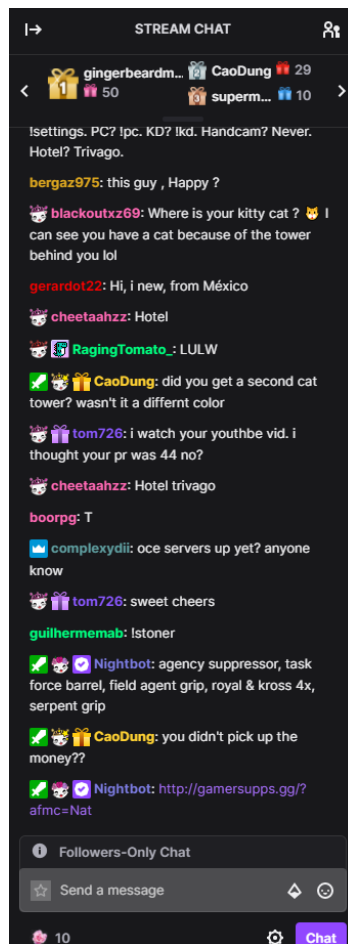


Figure 5: Cut-outs of the face camera from a screenshot showing a streamer working from their bedroom, and a discussion in the chat window.

For instance, as seen in *Figure 5*, the streamer is conducting their playbour in their bedroom, with the cat-tower in the background being asked about by one spectator. It illustrates then how these face cameras offer insights into the streamer's lives, showing that the streamer keeps cats, therefore enabling pets to become a topic of conversation in the stream. Likewise, as Ruberg and Lark (2021) note, female streamers are far more likely to broadcast from their bedrooms than men, using the erotic qualities of this private space to assist further in their affective playbour.



Figure 6: Cut-out of the face camera from a screenshot showing a streamer working from a domestic, office space.

While in *Figure 6*, the streamer is playing in an office space at home with popular cultural paraphernalia in the background, including a Pokeball cube decorated with a Santa hat, as this stream took place in December before Christmas. This shows how streamers can change the space for the purpose of livestreaming, with the streamer here displaying a sense of festivity and eccentricity in how they have decorated the room. In fact, these spaces then can be understood as an extension of the streamer and their character, being reconfigured through these practices of playbour.



Figure 7: Cut-out of the face camera from a screenshot showing a streamer working from a bedroom



Figure 8: Cut-out of the face camera from a screenshot showing a streamer eating during a break from gameplay in in front of a green screen.

Nonetheless, as shown by *Figure 7* and *Figure 8*, the backgrounds may be more plain, or even include a green screen, thus helping creating professional style. This illustrates how the face-camera set-up for each streamer and where the livestream takes place in the home is also dependent on both space and money, since the equipment needed for high-quality streams is expensive and it takes up room. While, as shown in *Figure 8*, the streamer is also showing their food to the audience during a break in play, again to create a sense of intimacy. As I discuss further in the next chapter, many of these streams last for long periods of time, and so through the face-cam you could frequently see streamers engaging in activities of daily living during these broadcasts (and sometimes even hear them if they were off-camera and had not muted the sound), thus giving viewers personal knowledge of their everyday routines and habits.

Altogether, these examples are indicative of how the home as a space of media has become both a site for consumption and production through processes of globalisation like the development of internet infrastructure that enable people to work from home. Moreover, they demonstrate how videogaming has become emblematic of the increasingly blurry distinctions between work and play and has enabled the extension of capital(ism) into increasing aspects

of our everyday lives (e.g. Ash 2012a; Taylor et al. 2015; Yee 2006). Subsequently, I argue that home should be considered as both a space for geopolitical consumption AND geopolitical production in the broadcasting of (Battle Royale) videogame streams, exemplifying the all-encompassing geographic reach of “Empire” as the home becomes further tied to global circuits of capital (Hardt and Negri 2000, 2004). Pointedly, in a development of how in digital play is symbolic of “Empire”, due to how consumption and production have long been prioritised over social and ecological reproduction (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009: 22-23), through livestreaming these domestic acts of daily living also now become another mode of production in the form of content. Likewise, it illustrates the ambiguous relations between war and violence, in terms of how war becomes culturally embedded into the space of the home through ‘domesticating’ practices of videogaming and streaming, with this digitally-mediated form of intimate, ludic war existing as part of a single complex of violence.

5.3 The Gaming Lounge

Gaming cafes have been identified as a significant physical, socio-cultural space for the gaming scene (Gosling and Crawford 2011). However, this research also focuses on the geopolitical and technological dimensions of the space. In particular, it seeks to explore the extent to which, as discussed in Payne’s (2010) insightful ethnography study of a gaming cafe, these spaces are co-constitutive of ludic war through the playing of military-themed games. Yet, it should also be recognised as Woodyer et al. (2016) discuss, that there has been a move towards the diversification and commodification of “indoor” play, with attention here being paid to youth clubs (Skelton 2000) and some leisure spaces (McKendrick et al. 2000). Despite this, there still remains a lack of engagement gaming cafes as youth spaces, which is striking considering how gaming has increasingly become embedded economically into urban landscapes as part of a boom in activity bars (Ambrose and Calverley 2023; Packwood 2023). In a similar vein to shopping malls, cinemas and restaurants, the gaming lounge can be seen as ‘legitimated space’ (Mecca 2021), a proximate, transitional place for young people moving from leisure with family to nightlife with peers. As discussed in the previous chapter, fieldwork was carried out in one gaming lounge within a leisure complex in a city centre location. A description of the gaming venue that was the site of study is described in the ethnographic notes seen below:

"I'm visiting the gaming lounge at 3pm on a Wednesday. From looking in through the glass windows at the entrance/exit it was very quiet, so I would be the only customer in from what I can see. After entering the lounge a friendly member of staff came to explain selection of games and consoles- with different areas for each console including racing simulators and VR headsets in corners of the room. [...]. It is a very nice set-up- with relatively high spec PCs, gaming chairs, keyboard, computer mice etc.- although no PS5's or Xbox Series X's were available. There were also some older consoles on the side where the racing simulators were, like the Nintendo Gamecube, where you could play older, classic games. I chose to play Fortnite on one of the PCs. The machines are mainly on hexagonal tables, split apart by dividers, although at the front there is a row of machines on a table and to right of the room as you come in there are sofas where groups can easily play on a console together. The space is colourful, with the room painted mainly in block reds, blues and yellows, with splashes of colour from decorations. The lights of the machines and screens also pop out as the room is otherwise quite dimly lit by lights from above, with no natural light in the main room. I can hear a range of rock, alternative, punk and pop music in the background, from the 2000s mostly. Around the gaming lounge, there is what can be best described as nerd memorabilia like a storm trooper cut-out, a Halo Spartan soldier cut-out, and large Pokeballs etc.- mainly characters, items, logos and other stuff from the most popular and well-known franchises. There is an almost timeless feel. In the air, there is a slight metallic type smell from the consoles and computers but it is otherwise non-descript. At the back of the room behind the counter, I can just about see the kitchen. From looking at the menu there is selection of hot and cold drinks, hot food like nachos and hotdogs, as well as snacks like crisps are available, with people being able to sit on sofas in the middle of the cafe. Overall the space looks to be very family/child friendly."

- Ethnographic Excerpt

The aesthetics of the gaming lounge, with for example, the use of bright, block colours, work to demarcate this as a youth-oriented, entertainment and leisure space, one that can be considered as a digitally-enabled playground. The use of cultural paraphernalia from popular, well-known media franchises such as the Star Wars Stormtrooper cardboard cut-out and the Pokéballs from Pokémon, further help to define and brand this space where customers, as

multiple media users (Taylor 2018) recognise these elements of 'nerd culture' and feel more comfortable in the lounge. This illustrates how popular culture works an assemblage productive of various affects (Dittmer 2015a), as I felt a welcoming, familiar and family-friendly affective atmosphere is produced through the aesthetics of the space (Grayson 2018). Furthermore, the 'stuff' from well-known franchises alongside the presence of classic consoles, such as the N64, help further engender a sense of nostalgia and familiarity for older customers. While on the other side, the site also had driving simulators and virtual reality headsets, which were especially popular among younger gamers. Although there were no PlayStation 5 or Xbox Series X/S consoles, which as I found out from a member of staff was due to a lack of stock caused by supply chain issues during the Covid-19 pandemic. The presence of classic and current consoles and other gaming equipment together with this use of cultural paraphernalia, helped to create this "timeless feel". This affective quality can be linked to notions of both the attention and experience economy (Ash 2013; Shaw and Warf 2010) as gaming cafes become part of the urban landscape in several towns and cities, further illustrating how videogames have become socially, culturally and economically embedded in everyday life (Gosling and Crawford 2011). I focus further on these links between nostalgia, affect and the attention economy in Chapter 9. Additionally, the gaming lounge as a leisure space can be seen as an example of commodification of this 'adulthood' and speaks to how there is a vacillating or unsteady 'swaying' between childhood, youth and adulthood (Smith and Mills 2019). This is demonstrated by the fact the event space was also available to book for stag and hen parties, thereby further exemplifying the great extent to which videogames have become socially and economically embedded into everyday urban landscapes as part of the night-time economy.

As a youth-oriented, leisure space, the gaming lounge tended to be busier at weekends and term holidays with the space or at least parts of it booked off for private events. For instance, during weekend visits to the space there were children's birthday parties at a cordoned off area at the front of the gaming lounge.

"I can see the gaming lounge generally getting quieter but at the cordoned off area, used by what looked like a kids party earlier, there is now a group of men over 18 who are all talking to each other- they look like the stereotypical gamer/nerd/goth types- white, long hair, dark or black clothes, although some in t-shirts/tracksuit bottoms and

some are in more formal clothing- smart trousers etc.. It is clear they know each other well as I saw two of them give each other a friendly hug. I could see them playing a variety of fighting games like Super Smash Bros there. It was looking like they were getting pretty into it- it didn't look like a tournament, but more of a party"

- Ethnographic Excerpt #2

While on one occasion, as discussed in the passage above, the space was host to a friendly party of young men playing a selection of fighting games. This is indicative of how videogames like other forms of popular culture are constitutive of social relations (Horton 2012). Moreover, it demonstrates how the medium enables the constitution and re-inscription of social groups or second-bodies politic through the 'playful vitality' (Malbon 1999) enabled through the various, emergent, ludic assemblages allowed in the space of the gaming lounge (Dittmer 2013a, 2013b). Specifically, individuals lose their subjectivity in these intimate, shared embodied experiences with other players, with these vital affects of playfulness 'gluing' together the friendship group - thereby demonstrating the significance of the gaming lounge as a physical space for the gaming scene (Gosling and Crawford 2011). Additionally, this anecdote hints at the ambiguous nature of videogaming, masculinities and violence and the relations between these phenomena, such as in reproducing a hyper-masculine gaming technoculture as these "hard-core" gamers compete against one another (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009; Payne 2010) - a point I attend to in more detail in later chapters. Yet, it is important to note that these fighting games are not directly related to representations of war, but illustrate how other forms of violence are still enabled through ludic assemblage. This then speaks to the need for scholars to move beyond just analyses of ludic war and to more broadly consider the affordances of videogames in producing other, various forms of violence to better capture the many processes of "Empire". As I come to next, whatever games are being played there, the gaming lounge is still instructive of banal and everyday geopolitical processes.

5.3.1 The Geopolitics of the Gaming Lounge

The public space of the gaming lounge has also been configured to produce an immersive gaming experience for playing customers, through both its physical infrastructure and technological equipment. For instance, the lounge itself is dimly lit, thus allowing players to better focus on the screens for more immersive gameplay. While in the central area of the

main room at the hexagonal tables there were black panels portioning off individual set-ups, which worked to draw you towards the screen of the console or PC, and thus allow individual players to focus on their own gameplay. However, the configuration of the desks meant that players were still able to interact with other members of their group if playing together, allowing for ludic collaboration between these team-mates, which is key to winning ludic war (Payne 2010). Likewise, at the side of the room there were sofas and consoles for small groups to sit and play together, in an arrangement not too dissimilar to that of a living room setting where a console is the digital hearth of the home (Flynn 2003). *Fortnite* and a variety of other multiplayer split screen games were often being played here due to the size of the screen. As such, the gaming lounge allows for different individual and communal gaming experiences - depending on the videogame, console and set-up - therefore enabling the emergence of an array of ludic assemblages.

“There were also two guys who appeared to be in their 20’s trying to play Apex: Legends on the PCs behind me. I could hear them talking with each other, arguing about strategy, with one of them sounding knowledgeable about the game and asking why their team-mate kept going off alone and getting killed. It looked like they had an issue with the headsets not working- but they moved PCs and it was fixed by a member of staff after some time. I later saw that they had moved to playing Smash Bros on the Nintendo Switch and again they were very animated”

- Ethnographic Excerpt

The passage above further illustrates the important role of technology in enabling the emergence and coherence of the ludic assemblage(s) of videogaming, as issues with the headsets meant the two gamers were unable to hear in-game sound. This made gameplay more difficult as they would be less able to detect enemy players – disrupting this sense of playful vitality (Malbon 1999). This anecdote then in two ways exposes how in ludic war, agency is distributed across multiple actants rather than concentrated in any one individual (human or non-human) body in these emergent assemblages (Taylor 2009). Firstly, it highlights the volatility of these ludic assemblages in their capability to produce immersive experiences as they can become deterritorialised due to technical issues. Secondly, it underscores the importance of staff in ensuring these assemblages remain stable, in fixing such issues so that

they can seize on the affective economy of these games and in turn ensure the success of the gaming lounge as a business. Significantly, the gaming lounge as a socio-cultural space illustrates how geopolitical and capitalistic processes become tied together under the biological regime of “Empire” (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009) - but as I come to next such processes are messy and can result in ruptures or discontinuities within “Empire”.

It should also be discussed how the gaming lounge in terms of its physical layout has been engendered as a ‘safe space’ for children and young people that can be regulated by adults. Throughout my visits to the site, I could often see parents watching their children from the middle of the room, where there were sofas and coffee tables for them to sit. Members of staff are also able to watch from the food counter at the back or the reception table at the front where you pay for entry, when they are not moving around the site to complete other tasks. The gaming lounge then can be seen as a symbolic of the geopolitical climate of fear in how children and young people are constructed as being simultaneously ‘at risk/risk’ (Pain and Smith 2008; Hörschelmann and Colls 2010). Moreover, I argue that it replicates the logics of what Katz (2007) terms as the “surveillant assemblage”, with discourses of surveillance having become materialised and embedded in processes of everyday life.

To be more exact here, the gaming lounge is instructive of several practices of surveillance in which players of Battle Royales and other shooters must be vigilant of enemies, while parents and staff watch over their children. As Katz (2008: 61) later elucidates “the regime of parental hypervigilance has much in common with that of the homeland security state” with national security measures and logics scaled down to the local space of the gaming lounge. Furthermore, the gaming lounge can be recognised as being designed according to adultist discourses, in facilitating these practices of surveillance that allow for the regulation of children’s play (e.g. Hemming 2003). Yet, at the same time, the gaming lounge is open until later in the evening and can be accessed by older customers. As a ‘legitimated space’ (Mecca 2021), the gaming lounge thereby acts as a proximate place in facilitating the transition from leisure with family to nightlife with peers for young people. Unlike other more ‘risky’ nightlife spaces such as pubs and bars, these legitimated spaces, where young people may share in activities with their parents, then in turn offer young people a degree of autonomy as afternoon leisure extends into the evening. This autonomy can also be shown in how the space could be reconfigured by young people, who were often moving around chairs to play on one

console together with each other more easily. Thus, the gaming lounge should also be seen as a space of transition for children and young people.

"I could see a father watching his son play a variety of games on the VR headset at the front of the venue, but he later wanted to play Apex: Legends on the Xbox. However as he was below the age limit for the game they couldn't play it, which both I and the member of staff found quite funny. The father and son left after that."

- Ethnographic Excerpt

Nevertheless, the extent of young people's autonomy as ludic agents is illustrated in the anecdote here above. Indeed, the ability for young customers to play age-restricted games is managed by members of staff, thus showing how the gaming lounge as a leisure space is still regulated by legal practices. Here then it is important to think about 'media in place' and how media becomes embedded and permitted in various places according to laws and customs, such as the PEGI ratings for certain games (Adams 2009). This is particularly pertinent when considering how in interviews with young gamers, we discussed how we played 18+ games - like those in the *Call of Duty* series - in the privacy of our own or friends' homes throughout our childhoods. Significantly, the inability for people under the age of 18 - a significant portion of the demographic - to play these games may also constrain the militarisation of this gaming lounge through ludic war compared to other less regulated spaces. Although of course it should be stated that this ethnographic research took place in a different country and different time to Payne's (2010) study, with a different geopolitical climate (i.e. 9/11 is now 20 years on) and gaming technology becoming increasingly more sophisticated with young people increasingly gaming online. Likewise, I argue the commodification of indoor play as part of the wider regulation of children's play in public space can also be considered as an antagonistic force to processes of militarisation in not allowing children to play these more graphically violent videogames. As such the materialisation of the gaming lounge as a 'child-friendly' space, thus illustrates tensions between the militaristic and neo-liberal processes of "“Empire”" in engendering its twin vital subjectivities of the 'consumer-worker' and 'citizen-soldier', demonstrating the discontinuities with "Empire" (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009). Nevertheless, again it should be recognised that other forms of ludic violence still occur in this space through non-military themed shooters and Battle Royales like *Fortnite*, plus the

fighting games noted earlier in this section. It is therefore suggestive of how war has become culturally embedded into everyday life (Hardt and Negri 2000, 2004), speaking to the ambiguous relations between play, geopolitics and violence.

5.4 Twitch Streams

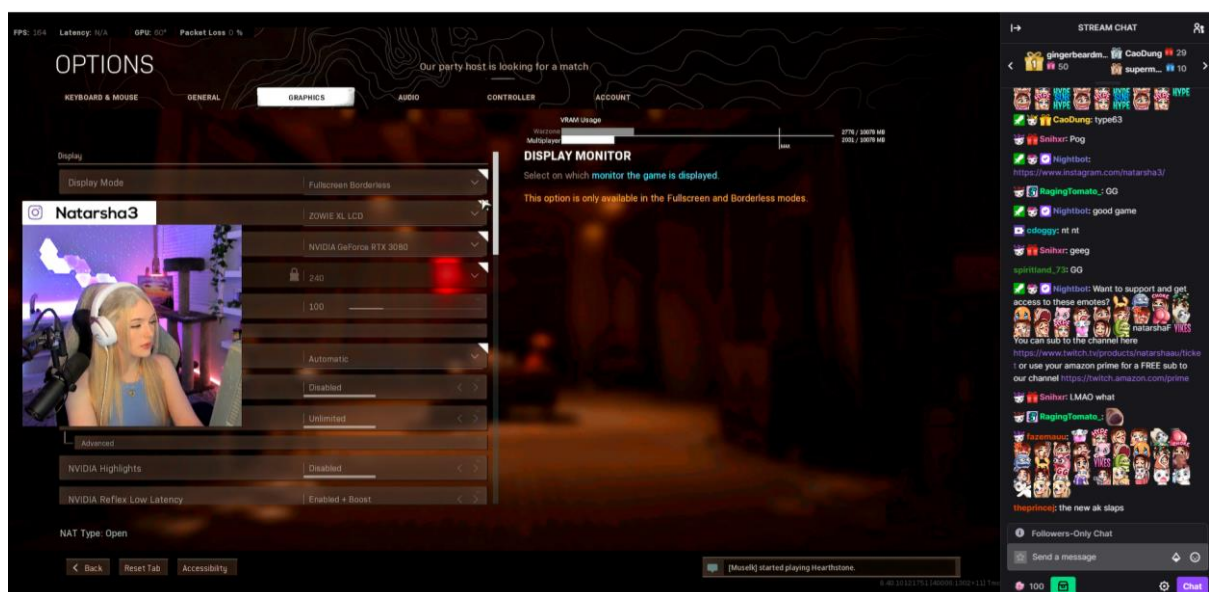
As Abarbenel and Johnsons (2020) write, Twitch can be understood as a form of 'social media entertainment' in terms of how it blurs the lines between social media and more traditional broadcast entertainment, with livestreaming becoming a major source of online media consumption. While as outlined earlier in this chapter, a Twitch stream is typically broadcast and spectated from domestic settings, it can also be thought of as a space in and of itself, a topological space produced through mediation (Adams 2009). Specifically, livestreams can be recognised as emergent, liminal spaces between the digital and the physical, facilitated by Internet infrastructure, with viewers spectating from their homes during their leisure time and streamers performing 'immaterial playbour' (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009) in their homes. These livestreams then are highly dynamic, often trans-national, social spaces where thousands of spectators can be viewing the streamer, who may themselves be playing with other streamers and gamers from across the world. Together in this contingent arrangement facilitated by Internet infrastructure, these heterogeneous actants co-constitute a complex, ludic assemblage that is productive of a variety of affects.

viewers both during the game and in breaks - as shown in *Figure 9* above. Here the streamer shows their gratitude to their viewers after many congratulatory messages of “GG” (Good Game) in the chat. Significantly however, as also shown above, the nightbot function has also been set up to assist the streamer in their playbour. To elucidate, the nightbot is a chatbot, or a conversational robot especially made for sites such as Twitch, and YouTube that allows the streamer to automate their live stream’s chat with moderation in addition to coming with other features like spam filters, commands, searchable chat logs, song requests, giveaways and timers. Thus, the nightbot works in a similar way to how as Taylor (2009) writes, mods to the user interface in *World of Warcraft* act as extra, non-human ‘members’ in a raid encounter through communicating and translating data to other human team-mates (see Chapter 3) – albeit here to instead circulate information to viewers of the stream. As such, it demonstrates the range of actants involved in streaming as well as how agency is distributed throughout these assemblages rather than concentrated in any one individual (human or non-human) body. Specifically, as shown in *Figure 9*, the nightbot displays the message “Lets get some GGs in the chat” to assist the streamer in manipulating and amplifying these affects of fun and celebration, encouraging viewers to interact and thus become further territorialised as part of these ludic assemblages - which is significant for their monetisation.

To follow Ash et al. (2018), it is also important to consider Twitch streams as a digital interface that mediates user experiences with a variety of economic, social, cultural and political services and products. As Ash et al. (2018: 166) write “interfaces appear as and through physical buttons, sound effects, icons, voice activation and haptic vibrations as well as icons or images on a screen” which are actively designed with the intent to modulate user action in ways that generate desirable results for those that own and employ such interfaces. Here the interfaces of Twitch are designed to enable multiple ways of monetisation, as well as facilitate the streamer’s ‘playbour’ in producing and manipulating certain affects that emerge and circulate throughout the stream. In other words, the interface is itself an assemblage that is co-constitutive of the stream assemblage. Thus, it can also be considered as an extension of the retention economy as produced through the interactions between players and gaming interfaces (Ash, 2013, 2015), with streamers seeking to produce an entertaining experience, and reproduce this sense of immersion for spectators. For instance, as also shown in *Figure 9* the face camera and adverts are moved away to the sides of the stream window so that

spectators are still able to view the in-game action and in-game information and thus become immersed into the stream.

As Johnson and Woodcock (2019) explain, for Twitch streamers there are several ways that they can make an income, with the loose regulations allowing for consistent innovation and change within the broader structure of the live stream. The first and most common method of monetising broadcasts is subscribing, where once a streamer gains a large enough audience to 'partner' or 'affiliate' with Twitch, a viewer can choose to make a monthly subscription payment to their channel (the cost of which is split between the streamer and Twitch). Specifically, there are three tiers of subscription, with Tier 1 at £3.99, Tier 2 at £9.99 and Tier 3 at £24.99. Additionally, those using Twitch Prime (and thus Amazon Prime) are granted one free subscription per month.



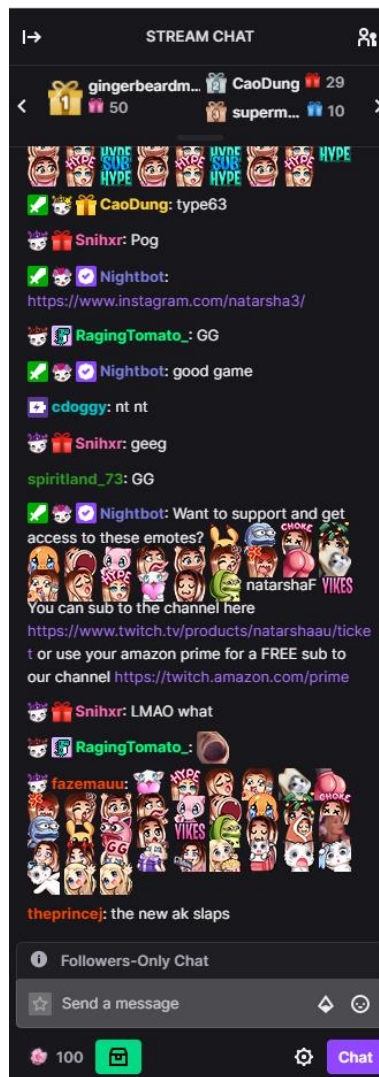


Figure 10: Screenshots from a Twitch stream of *Call of Duty: Warzone* where the nightbot is active and advertising the benefits of subscribing to the channel.

Here the viewer in return receives a range of benefits (which is greater for higher tier subscriptions), including extras like custom “emotes” and a custom badge that denotes their status in the accompanying stream chat window (as shown above in *Figure 10*). Many of these custom emotes fit with the humour, style and energy of a streamer’s channel and so emotes act both as a form of branding and monetisation, with different tiers of subscriptions allowing subscribers access to a selection of the emotes available in the stream chat. Again, the aesthetics of these interfaces are structured to modulate certain actions from their users (Ash et al. 2018) often carrying an intense affective quality through the use of things like colourful aesthetics or vibrations (including these emotes), and thus work to circulate and amplify ‘positive’ affects, such as those of excitement and celebration.

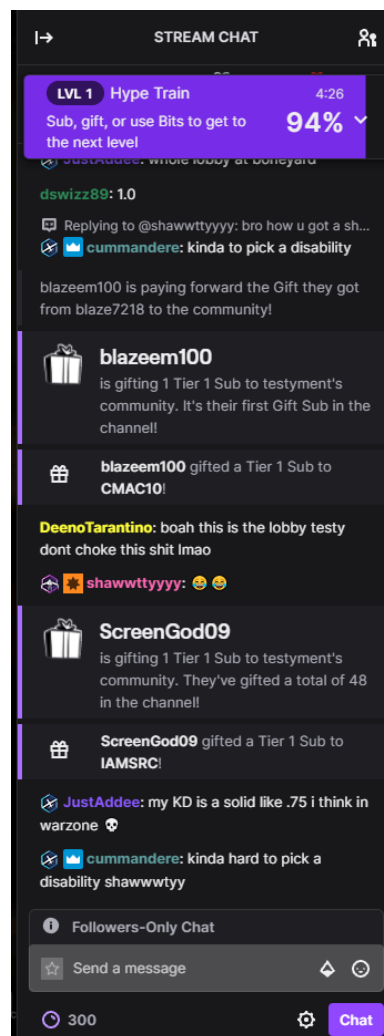
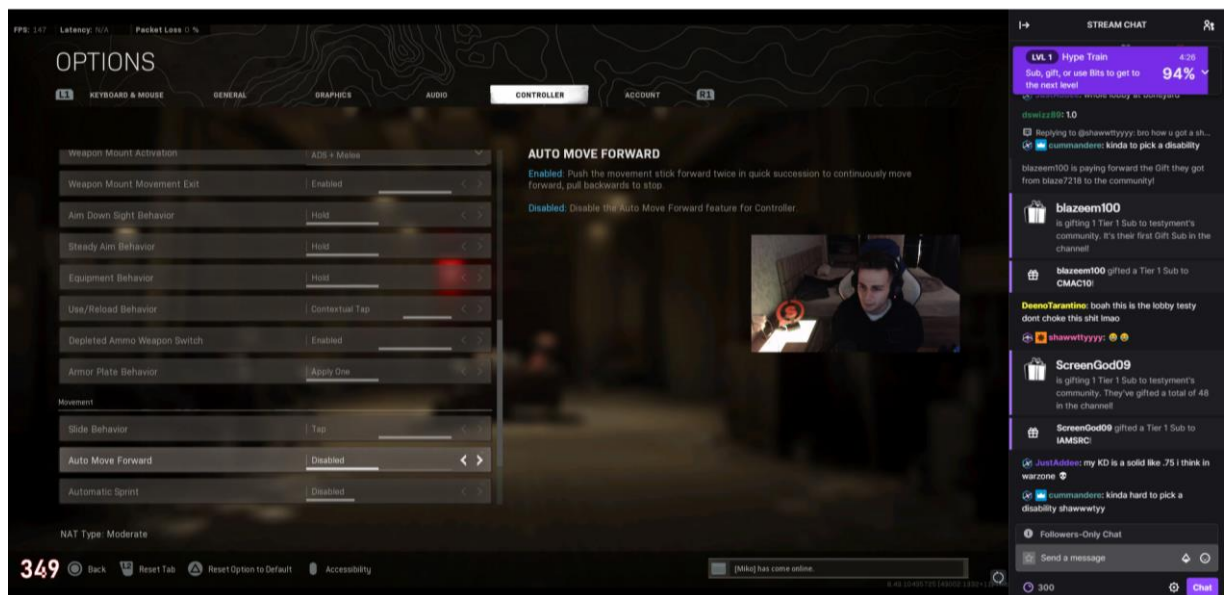


Figure 11: Screenshots of an ongoing 'hype-train' in a Twitch stream of *Call of Duty: Warzone*.

The success of a streamer is largely dependent on growing this audience, with streamers often displaying subscriber counts and targets, celebrating new subscribers, carrying out activities like 'sub-a-thons' or 'hype-trains' (as shown above in *Figure 11*) to drive up subscribers and enticing viewers to pay through rewards (Woodcock and Johnson 2019). To elucidate, 'sub trains' are when consecutive viewers subscribe to and/or gift others subscriptions to a Twitch channel. Thus, this activity illustrates how through performing affective labour and the use of graphics and sounds for alerts, streamers can further produce and manipulate these affects of 'hype' to encourage the development of these 'sub trains', since subscriptions are the primary way of monetising their content creation. As Woodcock and Johnson state, it is through these subscriptions that the culture of *Twitch* and the financial and technological infrastructures of the platform converge to produce an efficient, and compelling, monetisation model.

The second strategy for stream monetisation is donating, where viewers can make a payment to the streamer via another platform such as PayPal, or 'cheering', where viewers can purchase and/or through watching adverts earn the in-platform currency 'bits' to then donate to the streamer in return for better emotes.

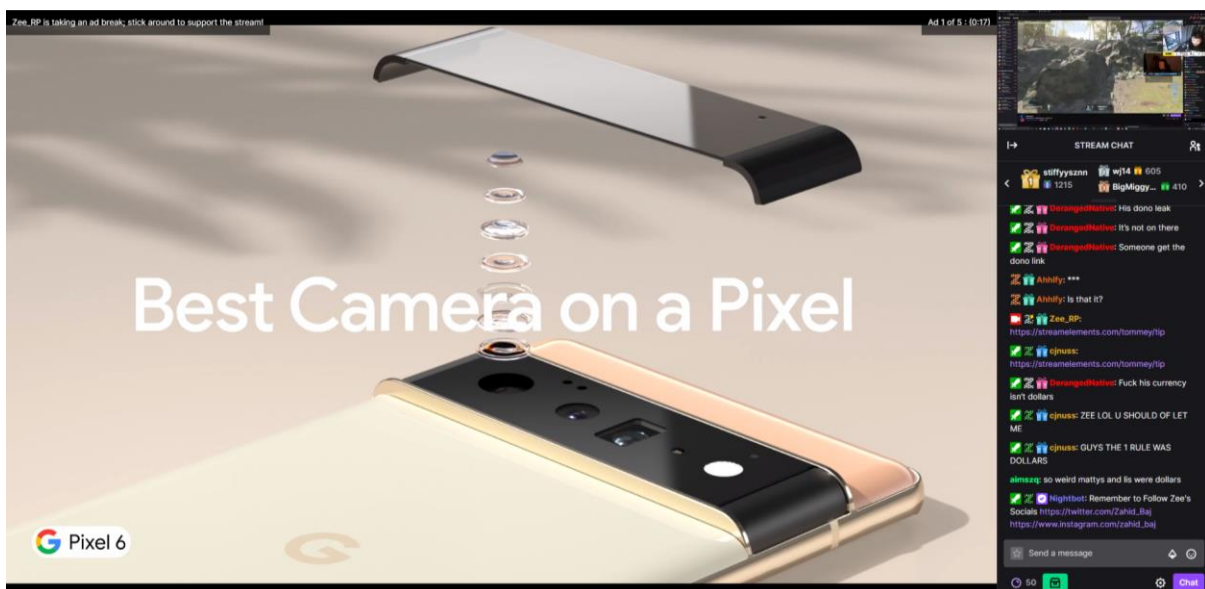


Figure 12: Screenshot of an advert for the Google Pixel 6 during a Twitch stream of *Call of Duty: Warzone*

The third method of stream monetisation is advertising, where adverts for games, gaming hardware/peripherals and other appropriate 'geek culture' items or services appear at the start and/or middle of broadcasts - as shown above in *Figure 12*. There is also the option for streamers to disable adverts, due to their unpopularity, implicitly encouraging viewers to donate to make up this shortfall in income. The fourth strategy of stream monetisation is through securing sponsorships. Here streamers for example, may be paid to play a game on their channel for a specific length of time, host a banner for a certain company next to their social media links, or display a link to a sponsor site where viewers can purchase some products or service at a reduced price. The fifth monetisation method is the use of competitions and donation targets. Here once streamers reach a goal they must then must carry out a certain pre-specified task (such as doing a dance). They may also run lotteries and raffles where winning viewers are given a reward/prize, or even display a "top donator of the day" counter to encourage viewers to compete to give the most money - in effect a gamifying of monetary support. The sixth monetisation strategy is random rewards, with many Twitch streamers implementing gambling-style systems with their donation rewards, as participating viewers can become fixated with beating unpredictable systems, establishing a sense of mastery or completion. The seventh and final method of monetisation is channel games, which are generally small, playful systems implemented on or integrated with a Twitch channel that viewers can then participate in via donations. I turn to notions of the gamification of monetisation again in Chapter 9.

Ultimately, as I found through my fieldwork, streamers of Battle Royale videogames monetised their streams through many of these strategies highlighted above, illustrating how Twitch streams act as not just a social space, but also a digital interface or a 'technical machine' in which a variety of socio-technical relations between humans and non-human actants emerge (Ash et al. 2018). As I explore further in Chapter 7, it is also important to explore how these strategies are indicative of a hyper-masculine technoculture and how Battle Royale videogames and streams can act both as forms of militainment and ludocapitalism in producing the "Empire"'s twin subjectivities of the 'worker-consumer' and 'soldier-citizen' (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009, 2020). Pertinently, as Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2020) write, Twitch is an example of a consolidating platform capitalism (in being owned by Amazon), and is involved in this reconfiguration of playbour – making it an important site of

study when it comes to understanding how digital spaces are increasingly integral to this new hyper-capitalist phase of “Empire”. It is imperative then to think about how these games and Twitch streams contribute to the micro-commodification and gambification of videogames - as I discuss in more detail in Chapter 9. Before this though, the final section of this chapter turns to the importance of internet infrastructure and its geographical dimensions.

Having discussed the stream assemblage itself as both a social space and digital interface, it is important to highlight how internet infrastructure facilitates streamer's playbour and enables the very emergence of these ludic assemblages. To begin with, it should be recognised that the social activities of streamers also extend to other digital platforms, as maintaining an almost constant online presence is a part of many streamers' playbour both in and outside of livestreaming (Johnson 2021). On these sites, they engage with the online community, foster further engagement with subscribers and followers, and share both game content - such as clips from streams - and personal off-stream content.

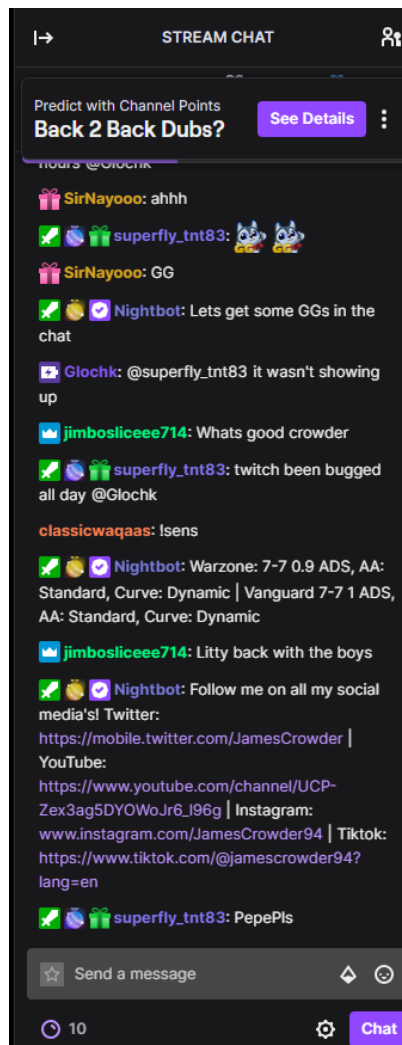


Figure 13: Screenshots of a break/intermission during a Twitch stream and the chat window where the nightbot links viewers to the streamer's other social media accounts.

As shown above in *Figure 13*, streamers through the use of the nightbot may display links to their other social media accounts including but not limited to Twitter, Discord and Instagram via their channel and stream chat. This again shows the importance and agency of non-human actants within the stream assemblage, especially in terms of how the nightbot assists streamers in their affective playbour. Moreover, this demonstrates how Twitch as a social platform is connected to the wider sphere of popular culture enabled through Internet infrastructure, all becoming part of a streamer's work in ushering a sense of intimacy as they engage with their audience. This is why it is vital to look at popular culture as an assemblage (Dittmer 2015a), one that pertinently here co-constitutes the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale streams.

In discussing how the development of Internet infrastructure has allowed for the practice of Twitch streaming, it should again be noted that the Internet itself exists materially as media in space, such as through servers (Adams 2009). Indeed, it is important to recognise how the materialities and geographies of the Internet shape these ludic assemblages, in for instance influencing the amount of ‘ping’ - as has also been recognised by Bos (2018a). Ping, which is slang for latency, is the time it takes for a small data set to be transmitted from your device to a server on the Internet and back to your device again. Subsequently, high ping or latency causes ‘lag’, i.e. the delay between player's actions and the reaction of the server that is usually prominent when playing online. In turn then, these technical issues have implications for breaking the connections of the player with the game world, becoming amplified in terms of how they disrupt a streamer's affective labour in engaging their audience. Or in the language of assemblage, high ping deterritorialises the game assemblage, and in turn the stream assemblage, causing affects of frustration and annoyance for both streamers and viewers. Altogether, this underscores the agency of internet infrastructure and how geography itself physically influences the manifestation and coherence of these assemblages.



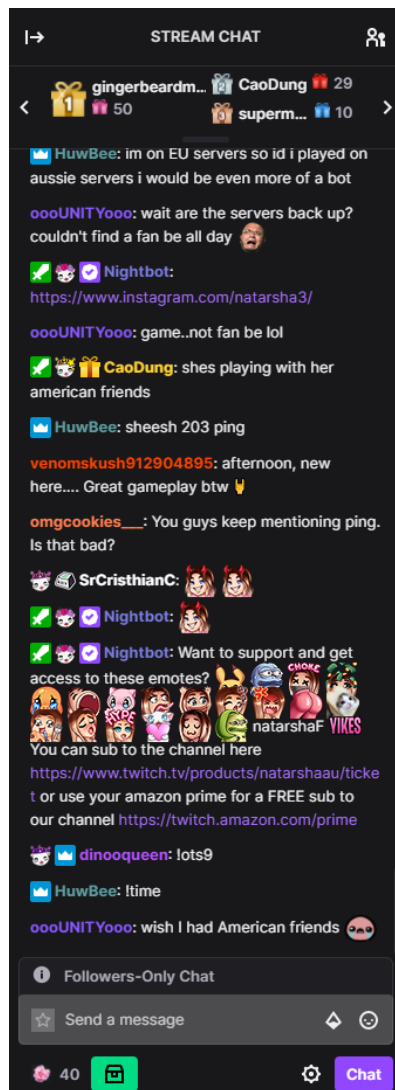
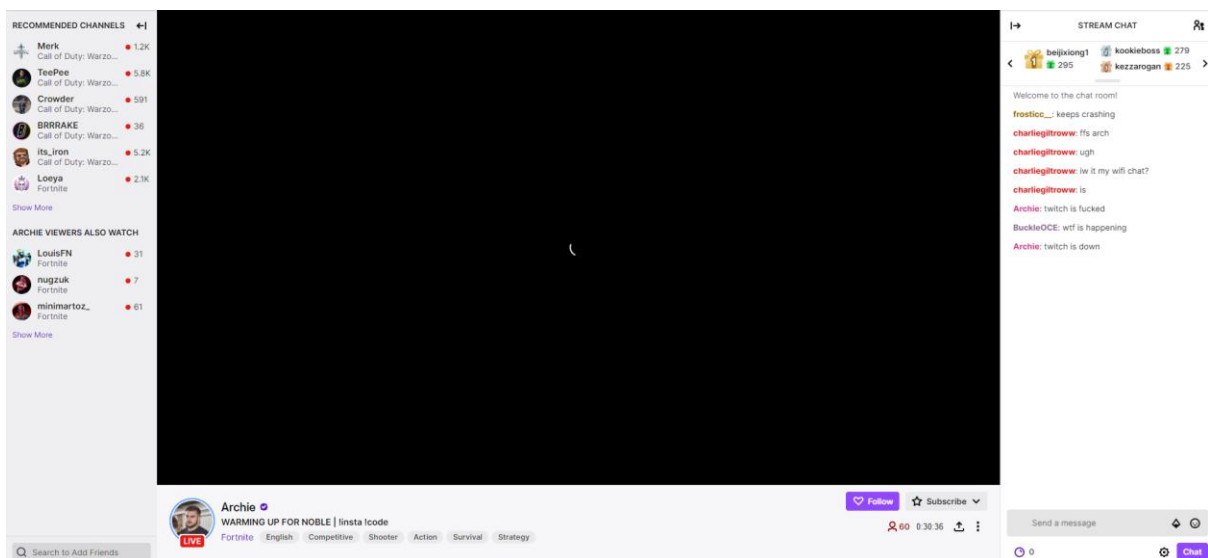
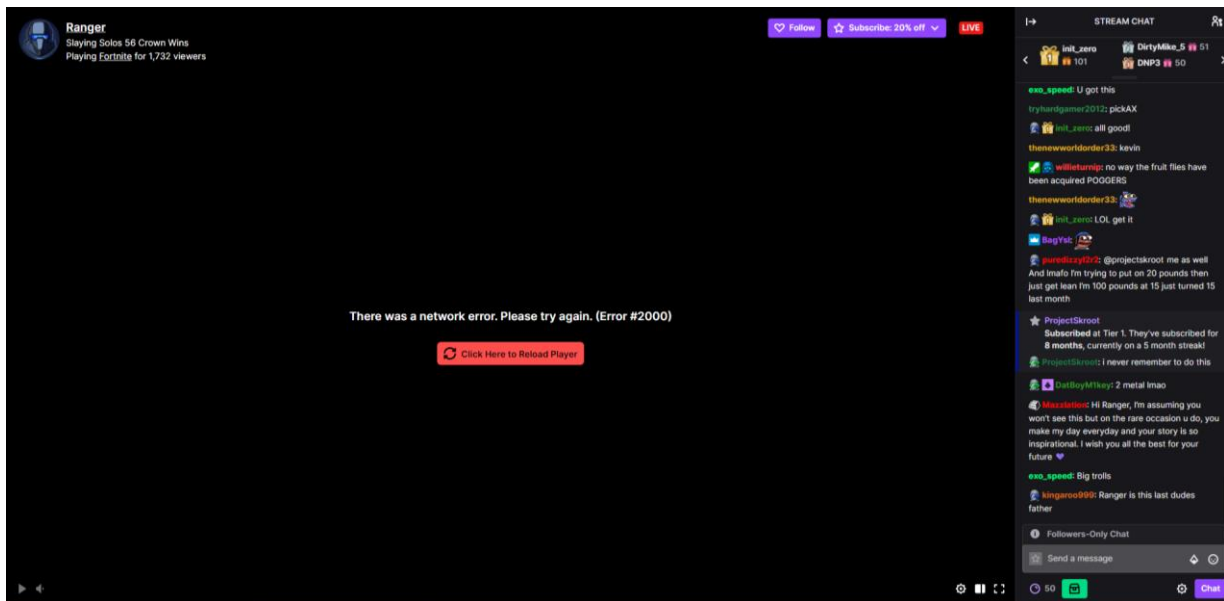


Figure 14: Screenshot showing a Twitch streamer talking about ‘ping’ with viewers in the chat window while playing *Call of Duty: Warzone*.

For instance, in the stream shown in *Figure 14* above, an Australian streamer was talking to team-mates and viewers about using different servers to be able to play and the issues around high ping that came with doing so. However, streamers may prefer to play in different servers than their country for various gameplay reasons, such as to avoid cheaters and ‘bots’ - an issue that will be discussed further in the Chapter 7. This then speaks to how agency is distributed across all of the human and non-human actants within these ludic assemblages, with the streamer needing to negotiate such affects to be successful in their playbour (as I outline further in Chapters 6 and 7). However, significantly these practices related to the immaterial labour of livestreaming that occur within these digital networks also symbolise how “Empire”

has an indeterminate geography and has led to the deterritorialisation of production (Hardt and Negri 2000).



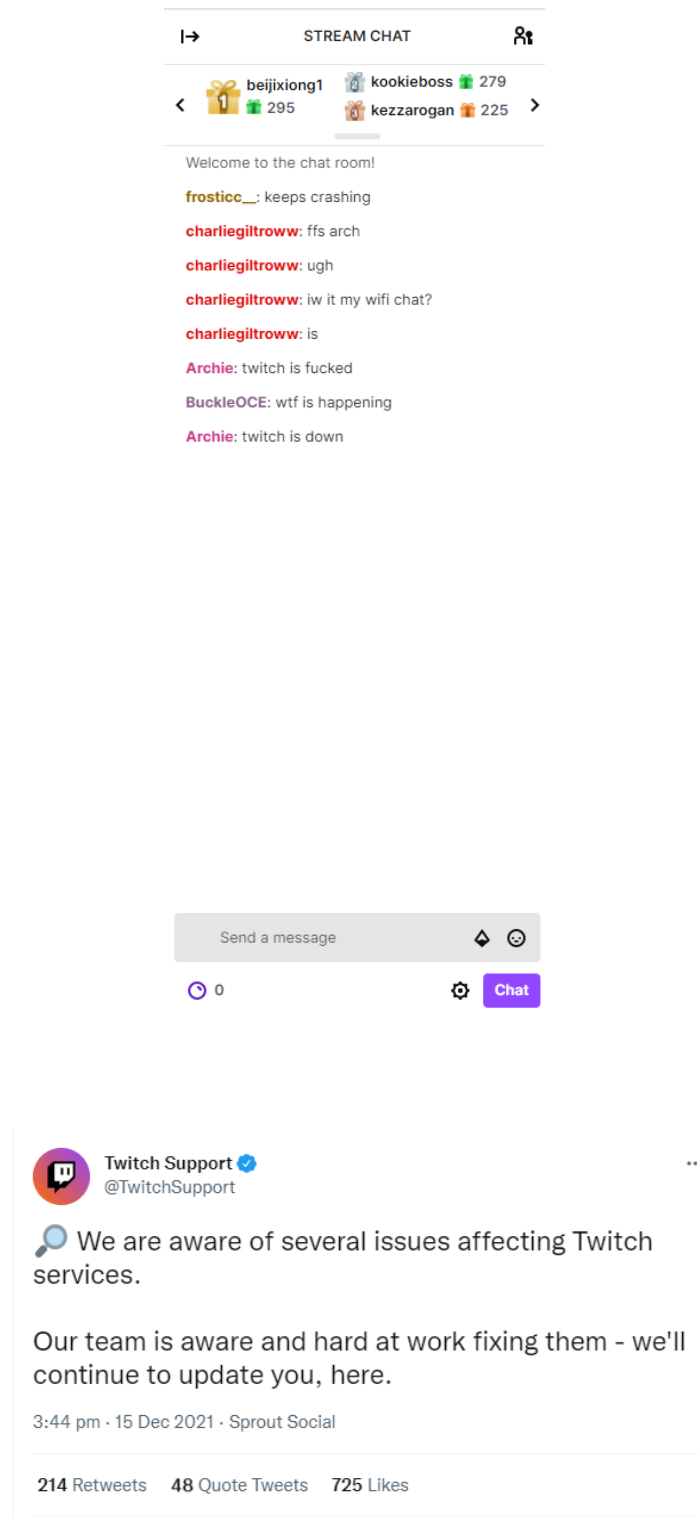


Figure 15: Screenshots of; a) two different streams and corresponding chat windows, and b) an image of the official Twitter account for Twitch during system-wide issues.

While in a more extreme example, as shown above in *Figure 15*, Twitch itself stopped working due a number of issues and errors with the system, thus deterritorialising and/or preventing the very emergence of these Twitch stream assemblages. This rupturing can be seen in a

similar way to Bennett's (2005) account of a blackout in North America, in which the assemblage of the electrical power grid failed or deterritorialised due to a cascade of faults, i.e. ruptures in the relations between a number of human and non-human actants. This is why it is necessary to move away from the anthropocentric, 'active audience' model to also consider the agency of these non-human actants in co-constituting these ludic assemblages (Behrenshausen 2012). Nevertheless, as I discuss in more detail in Chapter 7, this instance was later also productive of humorous affects, further speaking to the productiveness and vitality of (these) assemblages in generating a multiplicity of affects (Dittmer 2013a, 2013b), and also the broader indeterminacy of these ludic assemblages in terms of their affects on human bodies (Woodyer and Carter 2020). I explore these various affects further in the next few chapters.

5.6 Concluding Remarks

This chapter has in mapping the complex geographies of ludic war/violence outlined how the spaces of the home, gaming lounge, Twitch stream and the internet are central to ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and streams. In attending to the space of the home and its geopolitical dimensions, this chapter has explored how domestic spaces have become socially reconfigured for videogaming to allow immersive, private videogaming experiences, as well as recognises how these become spaces for media production through intimate practices of streaming. Next, this chapter engaged with the gaming lounge as a youth-oriented social and leisure space, in looking at how videogames have become embedded in everyday life as part of the urban landscape and cultural economy. This chapter then turned to the ways in which the space of the gaming lounge is instructive of everyday geopolitical processes, in recognising how it enables practices of surveillance. However, this chapter also highlighted how as a regulated, 'child-friendly' space, the gaming café revealed tensions between processes leading to the militarisation of the space and the commodification of young people's indoor play. Thirdly, this chapter attended to how the Twitch stream, as an interconnected, social media platform and digital interface facilitates streamer's playbour, such as through the nightbot, which enables emergent, ludic assemblages of Battle Royale streams. Lastly, this chapter considered the wider geographies of the Internet, highlighting its significance in the territorialisation and deterritorialisation of these ludic assemblages, as well as further emphasising how agency is distributed across constituent human and non-human actants. In

tracing the multiple physical and digital spaces, and the trans-scalar relations that form between a variety of actants across these sites in ludic assemblage, it has subsequently demonstrated how geography itself is co-constitutive of the biopolitical regime of “Empire”.

Building on these ideas, Chapters 7, 8 and 9 further explore how the economic and social dimensions of Twitch streaming become entangled with the geopolitical in the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale live-streams. In particular, it will attend to how these live-streaming services have led to a new stage of ‘interactive war’ where citizens can not only virtually observe, play and experience war (Stahl 2010), but through everyday, affective practices of streaming can then become producers, and in effect commodifiers, of ‘spectacular war’ in their broadcasts of military-themed (Battle Royale) games like *Call of Duty: Warzone*. Equally, it will also recognise how other Battle Royale videogames like *Fortnite* enable other forms of ludic violence. In other words, while it is important to attend to these interfaces' importance to matters of commodification, I argue that scholars also need to attend to how interfaces come to be encountered in relation to wider geopolitical and social forms of violence, for a greater understanding over how the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale streams are instructive of “Empire”. However, in the next chapter the focus is on the young gamers themselves who are co-constitutive of these ludic assemblages.

Chapter 6: Young Gamers and their Bodies in Ludic Assemblage

Having discussed the array of actants, spaces and places involved in the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and streams, this chapter shifts focus to young gamers and their bodies which become co-constitutive these assemblages via everyday practices of videogaming, streaming and spectating. Examining how videogames and the gaming scene have become socially and culturally entangled in several young gamers' life courses, this chapter develops a greater understanding towards the ambiguity of violence and play. As part of this there will be a critical engagement with the bodies of young gamers, in charting how videogames due to their immersive qualities are instruments of attention economy. Likewise, there will be a consideration of the ways in which young people's continued interactions with videogames and the wider gaming scene influences their subjectivities and identities. Following this, the discussion will move to the affective dimensions of streams for viewers in addition to the social effects from the embodied practices of streamers as they transform their own play into work. In foregrounding young people's voices and attending to how these games have become socially embedded in their everyday lives, while neither discounting nor over exaggerating their agency within these ludic assemblages through an emphasis on the body, this chapter will shed light on how young gamers through practices of videogaming, streaming and spectating become entangled in processes of "Empire".

6.1 Young People, Videogames and Everyday Life

As Bos (2018a) argues, the playing of military-themed videogames can be conceived of as an event of geopolitical consumption, highlighting the need to look at the social, material, and spatial contexts in which popular geopolitics is encountered in everyday life. Indeed in thinking about the ways in which games have become geopolitically implicated and intelligible within the everyday lives of players, it is also important to consider more broadly how videogaming has become embedded in social life. As Horton (2012) writes, the role that videogames and other forms of popular culture play in young people's everyday geographies should not be minimised, considering that videogames are constitutive of social relations and intimately entangled in daily routines. For example, the ability for individuals to reinforce social relationships in the performance of playing virtual war is a motivating factor towards playing games like *Call of Duty* (Bos 2018a). Pertinently, Gosling and Crawford (2011) have highlighted

the social significance and spatialities of gaming within patterns of everyday life, and how it shapes the nature of our social interactions, networks and identities. They theorise how gamers can be considered as being part of a “scene”, a concept taken from music fan studies. As they elucidate, while gamers can be theorised as a distinct, identifiable sub-culture at its core - due to having its own language and terminology, patterns of behaviour, and its mostly homogeneous demographic of mainly young, affluent, white men (at least in the West) - it is not a static grouping. Instead they suggest that the concept of scene in which gamers are part of a fluid, diffuse community, more accurately illustrates how this is a social grouping that individuals choose to belong to, but also one where their identity as gamers becomes more significant in certain physical spaces. This is important when considering - as will be discussed later – the constitution and re-inscription of social groups through ludic assemblage (Dittmer 2013b).

As Gosling and Crawford (2011: 145) further write, for many gamers playing videogames is a relatively ordinary or even mundane activity, here pointing to how such games can be repetitive and work-like in nature, being used to “relieve boredom” or “fill the time”. This is evident in the process of ‘grinding’, a term used by the gaming community to describe the repeated and often tedious tasks required by a player to advance in a game and/or unlock specific content. Another example of the everydayness of gaming is how it forms an identity marker and topic of conversation, as people at work, school and other social spaces talk about games, strategies, cheats, hardware, or read about these in written/online media. Likewise, the degree to which individuals feel part of a scene is contingent on their own investment and identification with(in) this particular community. For instance, those who are actively involved in producing game-related content, such as mod programmers, walkthrough authors and more recently streamers are most likely to feel a part of the gamer scene, as a potential career path, yet these are still fairly mundane activities and identities. Additionally, while gaming is predominantly located within banal and everyday social practices and the gaming scene is trans-local in nature, it can become ‘extraordinary’ and take on greater social significance within particular physical spaces such as gaming cafes, arcades and bedrooms - as outlined in the previous chapter. As Gosling and Crawford (2011) surmise, the importance of gaming needs to be understood and (physically) located within the complex and fluid nature of everyday life. Finally, as Taylor (2018) points out, playing video games is just one of the many

interconnecting media and leisure practices performed by people. Ultimately, in exploring how Battle Royale videogames and streams are embedded in everyday life as part of this media assemblage, this research looks to understand the ways in which they become entangled in and reproductive of “Empire”.

6.2 The Human Player(s)

As discussed with several gamers through interviews, videogames have become socially embedded in their everyday lives, with practices of videogaming like other types of media consumption being contingent on social circumstances and/or personal desire. Indeed, the start of interviews began with a discussion about the interviewees’ gaming histories, where we talked about the different consoles, genres and videogames that they had played with from childhood to the current day (or at least to the time of interview). Gamers do not just solely play one game or one genre of games, with their interactions with videogames throughout the life course shaping their future preferences and for some emotional investments with particular franchises. Again this is why it is important to explore how videogames comprise part of an interconnecting assemblage of popular culture to understand its capacity to shape individuals’ dispositions – which as I come to later in this chapter is significant in thinking about notions of the attention economy (Ash 2013).

Peter: *Uh, as long as I can remember to be honest. Ever since I was about six or seven. My first console was a PlayStation 1. I had a Gameboy Advance and I had a Gameboy Colour I think as well, back in early 2000s I guess. But yeah obviously back, back in those days, it was all just single player- I don't even think there was online back then, I think. Maybe like Quake and games like that actually on the computer, but I think on the console it was just- [inaudible] the computer games like the Sims, Doom, the old Doom. Yeah so quite a while ago.*

Johnny: *[...] I've been playing FIFA and sort of what I'd call softer games for quite a long time, probably, since I was about seven or eight. I've always had PlayStations and Nintendo Wii's and stuff like that, and I had, the old Call of Duty, the World at War one,*

with the Nazis zombie mode on, um, but I wouldn't play it that frequently when I was sort of 15, 16, um, when I could go into a shop and they wouldn't sort of question kind of thing. Um, and then I only really- I had a bit of a break from it, because I didn't really play on my PlayStation 3, um, for a long time, and then at Christmas so December time, January time, I got my Xbox, um, and downloaded Call of Duty and sort of a game called zombie X or something and um, started to play those ones a little bit more.

Here both Johnny and Peter talk about how they had been playing a range of games from a mixture of consoles and the PC since early childhood, including shooter games like *Doom*, *Quake* and *Call of Duty: World at War*. Indeed, throughout all of these interviews with young gamers, they frequently made reference to a litany of games and consoles they had played, underscoring exactly why young gamers should be thought of as multiple media users, since what they played throughout their lifecourse shaped their own individual opinions on (developments of) videogames (Taylor 2018). For instance, Peter who usually plays single-player games (and as discussed in the interview has a preference for playing alone) , remarks how the majority of games in the 2000s were single-player, when Internet infrastructure was less developed and consoles lacked the capability for online play, . Peter's account then is indicative of the rapid rate in which digital technology has advanced and increasingly shapes our everyday lives (Boluk and LiMeux 2017) – shown especially in considering the complex, trans-scalar ludic assemblages that are the subject of study in this thesis. While Johnny illustrates how individuals may not have played games at various points throughout their life, thus showing the fluidity of the gamer identity (Gosling and Crawford 2011). Moreover, both demonstrate how 'violent' 18+ shooter games have become socially embedded or 'domesticated' (Woodyer and Carter 2018) in their lives from an early age, being played with alongside other 'child-friendly' games. This is particularly important, since as discussed further in Chapter 9, these games have been the target of moral panics due to their violent content.

Interviewer: *Um so obviously said you played Call of Duty, the Zombies mode before, but when did you start playing the multiplayer and Battle Royale modes?*

Johnny: *Yeah well probably literally this Christmas, last Christmas, so nearly a year now and simply because I got- well my girlfriend's little brother, he's- well he's 16 this year. He, um, played it and said, you know, you have to get it kind of thing. So I got it straight*

away to sort of play with him and play with a couple of other people.

Interviewer: *Oh cool, so you normally play with others rather than by yourself?*

Johnny: *Yeah cos', I think, I think it was a pandemic thing more than anything in the sense of it was a way of contacting people and chatting to people and being the partner of a doctor at the time she spent a lot of time in the hospital and you know quite a lot of time to kill. Um, so it stopped maybe stop the sort of loneliness side of things a little bit.*

Interviewer: *[...] Um, so did you play quite often then? Do you still play often now?*

Johnny: *Yeah, yeah probably played three or four hours then, sort of at the end of a working day. I jump on it probably at 4 until 8 when she got home. And then now I probably play a couple of hours at a time, just when little brothers done his homework and stuff like that so it's not as frequent now, and obviously she's around a bit more, because she got into GP training, um so she's around a bit more, but... Probably weekends I play three or four hours a day, and then in the week it's probably an hour a night, maximum, just to sort of... See how everything's getting on, and I have bit of fun and the wind down from quite an intense job to be honest.*

The time spent playing videogames and participating in the gaming community has differed for players throughout their life course, being dependent on both other social arrangements and personal desire. For instance, Johnny discussed how he had only begun playing *Call of Duty: Warzone* with friends and family during the pandemic as he “had a lot of time to kill”. He thus attests to how videogames can become socially embedded in gamers’ everyday lives, as a part of their daily routine in being mundane activity used to fill time, but also as a social space from which to connect with other people (Gosling and Crawford 2011; Horton 2012). This was especially pertinent for Johnny, myself, and many others, due to the restrictions on physical/social contact with people from outside your household. Thus, the ability for individuals to reinforce social relationships in the performance of playing virtual war became more significant during this time (Bos 2018a). Nevertheless, as Johnny’s routine has since

changed as his social life returned to normal, subsequently illustrating why practices of videogaming should be understood in relation to the complex, fluid patterns of everyday life.

6.3 The Body and Videogaming

These preferences are also shaped by the affective qualities of videogaming, which is significant since as discussed in Chapter 3, political subjectivities are continually constructed and materialised through bodily encounters with popular culture. Again as Dittmer (2015a) reasons:

“The human body emerges as important because not only do traces of popular culture materialise in the body – a somatic archive of sorts – but also because the body serves as a site of affective interaction, where new forms of popular culture interact with previous ones, and with experiences of current events, as resources for political subject formation” - Dittmer (2015a: 49)

Thus the body can be understood as the locus where popular culture ‘sticks’ onto corporeal space in such encounters, forming an experience, which informed by past experiences, ideas and values, leads to the construction and materialisation of subjectivities in different and idiosyncratic ways (Caso 2018). In a similar vein, Shaw and Warf (2009) usefully consider the video game player themselves as an affective event in discussing how the experiential and representational qualities of digital gaming worlds enable the continual production and transformation of distinctive constellations of affects in constituting this subjectivity - aligning with how this study considers young people as assemblages or first-bodies politic (Protevi 2009). Pertinently here, as Ash (2013) writes, videogames are designed to attune affect in the production of captivated subjects who are then increasingly consume and become reliant on these games and services. Specifically, as Ash (2015: 3) later explains, it is the “localised folding of space-time” produced by the interaction between player and gaming interfaces that in turn powerfully shapes users' embodied perceptions of space-time. Significantly, these “foldings” are engendered to generate economic value by fostering and sustaining interaction and practices of consumption. The production of this sense of immersion can be seen in how Wes and Johnny below, spoke about the intense, affective qualities of Battle Royale videogames:

Wes: *I think, in just a game in general like. But especially, you know, if you're surviving and there's 20 people left and your, you know, in a group of four. Or even you're own your own, and you know, three f-friends or teammates are watching. It's like your heart is pumping, your hands are sweating. We always like joke, like especially when I'm playing with my friends that, they're all watching me, we're all like "I am sweating a lot" [laugh] And it's just the way it is when you're, you know in those like high pressure situations. I feel like when it's like that, anyone could be in the room and you would not know they were there, you were like really tuned in, um, heart racing, and you know fighting to stay alive.*

Johnny: *Yeah I'd say so. I'd say because- I think it's the amount of realism in them now, where, whereas things like World at War, the old ones. I think it's obviously because of the graphics and they've gone a lot further, but when you look at it, that was more cartoon like. It was- you know you didn't think- yeah obviously the graphics were amazing, but you didn't think you're in a real world scenario. A because you're shooting zombies and B because the graphics weren't that great. Whereas now, because it's almost like you're watching a film, you feel like you're much more involved and, as I say, when you go into the bubble, when you've got your headphones on... You're kind of in that moment aren't you. It's like, it's like slightly comparable being at a football match, for me, because, you know I'll go into a zone and I'm watching Burnley or watching Newcastle and watching whoever and I'm watching that team like I am watching the game. Whereas, as I say, originally it didn't feel like that.*

Wes discusses how the intensity of such affects builds throughout a match of a Battle Royale videogame as the number of players gets lower and the safe zone shrinks in size. In gesturing and describing how his "heart is pumping" and his "hands are sweating" he exemplifies the embodiment of these immersive affects. Moreover, he details how emergent affects of immersion, humour and fun are also circulating among the bodies of his group of friends in the production of this ludic assemblage. In doing so, he underscores how these games are generative of a playful vitality, where a player's sense of the self is displaced when they become 'lost in the moment', as affects circulate through them in an intimate and shared

embodied experience with other players (Malbon 1999). In a similar vein, Johnny talks about how levels of immersion in videogames have intensified to such a degree that these games produce a “bubble”, or a “localised folding of space-time” as technological advancements allow the production of more, realistic graphics (Ash 2015). Furthermore, in comparing the affective registers of videogaming, watching a film, and spectating a football match, Johnny demonstrates how the body acts as both a somatic archive and a site of affective interaction, with these experiences acting as a reference to how they move through and make sense of everyday life (Caso 2018; Dittmer 2015a). To be precise, it shows “how the human body, and its cognitive sense-making abilities, are shaped by ongoing engagements with particular ways of seeing/knowing embedded in popular cultural forms” (Dittmer 2015a: 49). Notably, these comments also highlight how developments in digital technology have led to a blurring between real and digital experiences as it increasingly configures our everyday lives (Boluk and LiMieux 2017) as videogames transform the ways in which we think about, experience and interact with space and time (Thrift 2003, 2004a, 2004b). Additionally, Johnny hints at the potentially problematic aspects of these processes in relation to the increasing levels of realism in violent games - a notion that will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 9.

Elliot: *But yeah Warzone, for me because I'm more familiar with that sort of sense of gaming. And even Warzone you know you can play with friends, I always play solo. I prefer to play solo I, for me, I haven't got a team dragging me down, I can play solo, I can- I can do my own strategy. Um, most of the time it doesn't work but, that's- [Interviewer: [laugh]] But it's something I'm more familiar with, but it's that quick pace action, the fact that you've got this gas cloud coming in, you know you've got to watch where you're running, you've got to make sure you're not going to run into an enemy team and get plastered against the wall. Things like that. It's just, it's for me, it's that sort of exciting, run of it, but Warzone personally just because I played Call of Duty in the past and it's that familiarity kind of- You know I know how to play this game already, so I'll stick to it. That's just what it is really.*

Poppy: *Yeah for me it's kind of like the best of both worlds, because I've never really played like a shooter game before Fortnite. I was very much- like I'm old school. My, my*

like background in gaming is like Spyro [Interviewer: Yeah.] You know, and like story games, you've got to collect stuff and you've got to do challenges, love all that. And still even now love all that with Assassin's Creed and like, South Park, I'm really into the South Park games and Fortnite, was the first game where I had to learn how to like aim and shoot at people [laughing] Which is great, because I still got the, aesthetic. I like everything to look bright and you know I've got a mint TV, so the colours look amazing on the TV. Um and my partner plays games I just consider to be a bit darker. Literally darker you know, on, on the screen and a bit more like heavy, kind of background context to the game. And it just doesn't give me the same sense of like ahh [sigh of relief] You know I'm here to enjoy myself it's a bit more like "Ooh right what are we doing? We're going into this dark room like, oh my God". Yes, for me, it is a completely kind of different vibe but just it feels more, um, carefree I guess.

Significantly, players' videogaming preferences are also related to different aspects of these games be it in terms of aesthetics, the levels of graphical realism that they produce, the gameplay experience, or links to their gaming history. For instance, when Elliot explained why he preferred *Call of Duty: Warzone* over other Battle Royales, he referred to his familiarity with the controls from playing older games from the *Call of Duty* series and not wanting to learn the sensory and somatic skills needed to play those other games. This illustrates Ash's (2013) point about how these games are designed to produce captivated subjects so to encourage users to keep playing, with Elliot through years of experience becoming attuned to the specific, fast-paced style of gameplay characteristic of the *Call of Duty* series. Moreover, it demonstrates the specificities of different Battle Royale videogames, as there is a diversity of gameplay experiences across the genre. For example, Poppy talked about why she preferred *Fortnite* to other Battle Royales and shooter games, referring to its slower pace, its quest system element and its bright, colourful aesthetic - features that she had enjoyed from other games. Altogether, this exemplifies how Battle Royales are an assemblage of other genres, but also the ways in which player's preferences are shaped in part by their prior bodily encounters with videogames, which subsequently shapes their political subjectivity and future engagements with the medium, other forms of popular culture and even the everyday itself. In thinking about the subjectivities and identities of these young gamers it is therefore necessary to consider their interactions with the wider gaming scene as I come to next.

6.4 The Gaming Scene

Ben: *Um, so I have Discord, and I do join a couple of the Discords with games that I play, but I, personally, I just- I think they call them 'lurkers', I just like look. I don't really like type in them. Um, so personally no I don't interact with people outside of the game only within the game.*

Wes: *Yeah I mean I definitely like watch or have watched a lot of YouTube gaming videos and things like that. And when I was at uni I didn't, for like a period of time I didn't have my PS4 so I went to like a gaming cafe and that was pretty fun. Like you chat to a few people there and whatever. Um, I actually, when I first started playing Overwatch about, I don't know whenever it first came out four or five years ago. I met a French guy just playing randomly like in a lobby and started speaking to him, and then we crewed up- played a few games and then play another few games, a couple days later. And it got to the point where we'd be like playing every day together, adding each other on Instagram, Facebook, whatever and even now like five years later. I've not played with him in three years but we'll still like message, and you know, keep in touch and I said, like as soon as I start my new job I'm going to arrange to go to France, just for like a free weekend away, stay at his and whatever. So interesting little story that one.*

Indeed, gamers also have varying degrees of interaction with the wider gaming scene, with many of the interviewees considering themselves more as 'lurkers' i.e. people who remain invisible on online spaces, rather than active participants within the gaming community. For instance, Ben talks about how he mainly observes the community through Discord³ but otherwise does not interact with other players outside of the game. This underlines both the trans-local and diffuse character of the gaming scene (Gosling and Crawford 2011). These

³ Discord is a Voice-over-Internet Protocol (VoIP) and instant messaging social platform that has become especially popular in the gaming community, being widely used by esports organisations and teams, streamers and LAN tournament gamers.

characteristics of the gaming scene are further demonstrated by Wes who talks about how he has participated with other gamers in both digital spaces such as YouTube, and the physical space of the gaming café. Moreover, in discussing the formation of a friendship with another player in the gaming café, Wes illustrates how videogames, have not just become integrated into social relationships, but also have enabled their formation, even across physically distant space (Horton 2012). This again speaks to their embeddedness in everyday life, and more broadly how digital technology increasingly reconfigures our daily practices (Boluk and LeMieux 2017).

Ben: *Um, they probably just think we're all a bunch of nerds to begin with [laughing]. I get that quite a lot. [Interviewer: Yeah yeah yeah.] The thing is, they think we don't have any life, we're just wasting life away. Not everyone though. Some people do, I just don't care or kind of like get involved asking questions that are like actually interesting on what you're doing. Um, on like personal accounts though like, you do get called like a nerd or you have no life... I'm like "Um cheers for that one... got more of a life than you, I actually talk to people". Uh, no that's just it really like, they don't really care like, in my opinion anyway, from my experiences they don't really care that you play games, they're not really that interested they don't- They just like ignore it as if it's not really a thing.*

The fluidity of the gaming scene, is also shown by how gamers, despite having different levels of participation and emotional investment, still identify themselves as part of the wider gaming community, viewed differently by outsiders. For example, Ben talks about how gamers are viewed ambivalently by many, but by others may be derogatorily labelled as nerds, with videogaming considered a waste of time. Although here there should also be recognition of the rapid mainstreaming of geek culture and the incorporation of geek masculinity into hegemonic ideals as technological devices and media that were once associated with geekdom become indispensable parts of everyone's daily workflow and social habits (see Salter and Blodgett 2017). This can be seen in the rising popularity of livestreaming videogames, something also highlighted by several interviewees. Moreover, here Ben counters this negative view by asserting that as gaming is a social activity it actually means they are more involved in

society in comparison to some non-gamers. Thus, despite considering himself as a 'lurker' in the gaming community, with little to no interaction with other players beyond the game, I argue that he contradicts himself in still defending his identity as a gamer, thereby illustrating Gosling and Crawford's (2009) point that this is an identity that people choose to belong too and becomes significant in particular interactions.

Elliot: *-Streams? Um, yeah sometimes. It's kind of the same with forums, it depends, how much- how much the game, or the topic of the game, or whatever would matter to me. The most recent thing I did stream wise was, um, play with 343 Industries on their live stream. It's like a community playdate, and because you play with them, you get like a little, little name plate or something like that and to me, that means the world instead of actually getting a promotion at a job or something like that. That's, that's another thing I meant before you know and, like the fact that I received a nameplate just for playing with the developer of the game. That meant so much to me it's like, why does that mean so much to me? Why not going out and getting a promotion or getting a new job or, saving up to go on holiday or meeting someone. Like you know why does that not matter to me anymore? And I think that it's not just me that applies to, I think it applies to a lot of young people.*

In contrast, Elliot, discloses how his deep emotional investment in the *Halo* series of shooter videogames meant he was very pleased to receive a name plate after participating in a live-stream run by the game's developers. Thus, Elliot illustrates how these games can become deeply entangled in young peoples' life-course and take on great, personal significance. Furthermore, it exemplifies the fragmented and complex nature of the gaming scene, where players can be considered as fans of certain games by actively engaging in some selected sub-communities more than others and being passive or even disinterested towards others. Additionally, Elliot's participation as a player within this livestream, is instructive of how even as consumers, young gamers become producers, such as through the 'earning' of name-plates, with their emotional investment capitalised on by gaming companies. Subsequently, this demonstrates how in blurring work and play, videogames are generative of "Empire"'s vital subjectivity of the 'worker-consumer' (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009). This is why it is

important to move beyond the simplistic 'active audience' model and to not classify gamers simply as 'fans' of these games since these audiences themselves enact affective playbour (Taylor 2016b). In short then, young gamers should be recognised as complex agents with fluid and ambiguous cultural subjectivities – and as I explore further in Chapter 8, this ambiguity relates to young gamer's political participation, subjectivities and engagements. However, the next section further focuses on the long-term affects of young people's interactions with videogames as economic subjects.

6.5 Videogaming, Nostalgia and Childhood

Peter: [...] I don't know if you played the old Mafia games, but I didn't actually play them when they first came out. I played like the first Mafia I think last year there's about a 20, 18 year old game, and I just played it for the first time, um, and I still loved it because I could see like the aspects of it that were like other old games I played. The graphics are terrible, you know, like and there's definitely some glitches and stuff. Um, it was a really old dated game but [a friend] also played it when he- because it's actually a Czech game and he played it as well when he was young. And he could really appreciate it more I think than maybe like [another friend] maybe would and that's not like knocking on [another friend] or anything. And I think if he played it then he might not maybe enjoy it quite as much maybe because that like nostalgic feeling or- You know, I guess, because those are the kind of games that I grew up on. Um, the games I assume that he grew up on probably weren't like that, he probably- how old is he? Let's just say he's 20 so he was born in 2001 so, let's say he started playing games when he was like 10- so yeah it would be like Call of Duty's and those games were probably the first he started to play. And I think that things like the graphics, for example, like I would imagine that you know that when I was younger the graphics were terrible some of them. PlayStation 1 graphics, you look at them now and they're just a joke.

Interviewees also often made clear the differences between what gameplay experiences were like, such as in terms of their aesthetic, technological and affective dimensions, from during their childhood compared to current videogames. For instance, Peter talked about how although developments in technology have enabled the production of games with better

graphics, he still enjoys playing earlier games due to feelings of nostalgia, which as he himself argues younger people may not experience when playing these older, classic games. This then demonstrates how the affect of fun is not necessarily derived from the aesthetic or technological qualities of these games, as Peter liked playing *Mafia* despite its “outdated” graphics and glitches. Instead, I reason that his enjoyment draws on the affective reservoir of nostalgia swelling from his time playing similar games during his childhood.

Elliott: [...] *I think nostalgia, maybe, you know a lot of the time- like a lot of the games I play are quite repetitive in nature. I mean Halo, it has definitely evolved over time. Call of Duty, it's one of those games that it seems like they pump out the same game, every year it's just a different sort of, a different look, so to speak. But it's, it's that sort of nostalgia and it's that sort of, um you've started off with the game so it's slowly evolving, you're slowly evolving with the game too. I think that's kind of where I look to pick up the controller and say it's something I feel so familiar with, I'm just going to keep at it, rather than look into something new, I have a Nintendo Switch myself. I hardly ever touch it because it's not the same. You know-*

Importantly, this notion of “growing up with these games” is similar to how in the passage above and earlier Elliott discussed how he preferred *Call of Duty: Warzone* over other Battle Royale videogames due to his familiarity with the controls and gameplay. Thus, familiarity or nostalgia could be understood as a longer temporal affect of the attention economy of videogames, one that has shaped a player’s preferences for, and somatic capacities to play particular games. This then highlights the viscosity or ‘stickiness’ of popular culture on players’ bodies in shaping their subjectivities (Caso 2018; Dittmer 2015). Specifically, these affects of nostalgia and familiarity work to reproduce the economic subjectivity of gamers as consumers throughout their life course, so that they keep buying these games and related products. As I argue further in this thesis then, it is imperative then to explore how the immanent power of ludic and other popular cultural assemblages, can enable the production of certain political and economic subjects, especially when thinking about how Battle Royale games and streams work to produce “Empire”’s twin subjectivities of the ‘solider-citizen’ and ‘worker-consumer’ (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009).

“Through doing these interviews I hit up on realisation that like one of my participants talked about, I/we/my/our generation have grown up with games like Call of Duty being a large part of our childhood and everyday lives. Coming out of the interview it definitely made me feel a lot of nostalgia, thinking back to when I first got Modern Warfare 2 for my PlayStation 3 one Christmas as all my friends from school played on it too. Makes me think exactly how much time did I spend playing these games?- I say as I’m doing research on them”

- Excerpt from field diary

Likewise, my discussions with interviewees about older games that we played during our childhoods frequently made me reflect on my own personal experiences of videogaming, as seen above. After the completion of my first two interviews, I reminisced about how and why I first started playing these games at a young age in reflecting on how like my interviewees I ‘grew up’ with these games in my life. In doing so, I demonstrate the fluidity and multiplicity of my identity as a gamer, young person and researcher, attesting to how these violent, military-themed videogames have become ‘domesticated’, or in other words socially and culturally embedded in everyday life, thereby speaking to the ambiguous relations between violence and play. The nature of play is made even more unclear when thinking about the affects of viewing a Twitch stream as I discuss next.

6.6 Viewers of Twitch Streams

As discussed in the previous chapter, Twitch streams are a complex social space where individuals from across the gaming scene interact. Yet, while some attention has been paid to some social and cultural practices of videogaming (e.g. Bos 2018a), there is a dearth of work on the practices of streamers and spectators within popular geopolitics and human geopolitics. As such, the remainder of this chapter will start to shed light on how both viewers and streamers within the emergent ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogame streams, (inter)actively engage in affective playbour as media users (Taylor 2016b), and thus as subjects of “Empire” become reconfigured into both ‘worker-consumers’ and ‘soldier-citizens’ (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009; 2020). To begin with, it is important to highlight the broader and highly social dimensions of the gaming scene, with streamers found to be frequently

talking about their everyday life to both team-mates and viewers in the streams I studied. Discussions include both gaming and non-gaming related topics and are specific for each individual streamer, with viewers being invited to join into these conversations.

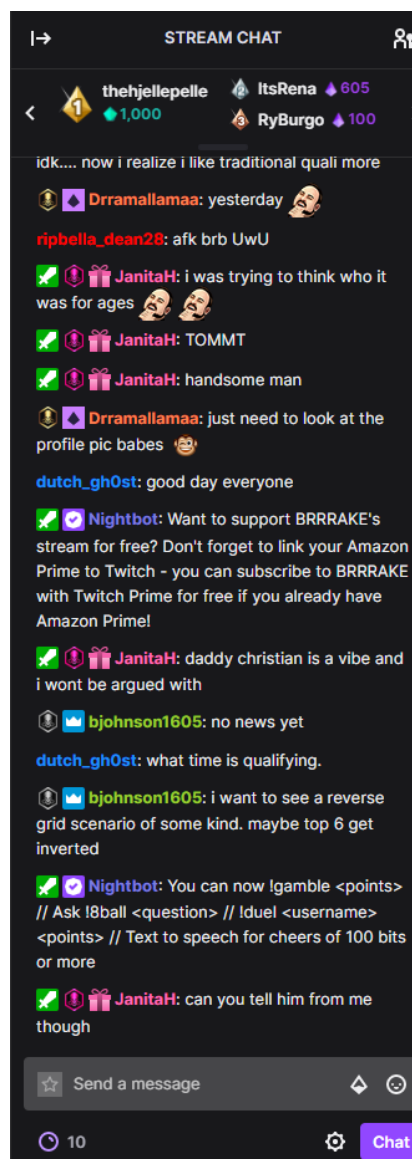


Figure 16: Screenshots of a part-time Twitch streamer talking to viewers in the chat window about Formula 1 during a game of *Call of Duty: Warzone*.

For instance, as seen in Figure 16, one part-time streamer who works as a Formula One engineer, in addition to talking about their gameplay, also had conversations throughout the stream around the sport with interested viewers. This example shows the fluidity of the gaming scene, as many viewers of this streamer will likely to be both gamers and Formula 1 fans (Gosling and Crawford 2011), and therefore illustrates why individuals should be understood as multiple media users who actively engage with other forms of popular culture, like sport (Taylor 2018). Furthermore, it demonstrates how videogaming and streaming has become socially and culturally rooted into everyday life as part of this wider 'global' media assemblage. Nevertheless, it is crucial to further consider the affective dimensions of these streams and how they relate to these social dynamics, in thinking of viewers' capabilities, subjectivities and agencies. Again as Taylor (2016) argues, spectators play a vital and agential role in digital gaming and do not map neatly onto binary distinctions between 'active' and 'passive' orientations to media consumption. This can be seen in how the para-social bonds built between the streamer and their viewers are productive of homosocial affects with streamers often expressing love for their community to show their gratitude for subscriptions and donations and many viewers often responding to this in similar ways. Indeed, in the stream chat of this broadcast, the player was complimented with words like "daddy", "babes" and "handsome" by viewers, with this homosocial language being characteristic of the wider gaming and online community (Taylor and Voorhees 2018). Significantly, this normalisation of homoerotic practices, discourse and desires within gaming spaces like Twitch streams is illustrative of the complex relations between videogaming, technology and masculinities (see Taylor and Voorhees 2018) - as will be expanded on further in Chapter 7.

The social dimensions of these streams also intersect with their affective qualities. Indeed, when conducting Twitch stream ethnography, I often found myself immersed in the streams, in actively wanting the streamer to win and laughing at certain moments.

"I have also been picking up a lot of techniques from watching the highly-skilled players on these streams, almost by osmosis. I'm remembering to do stuff like swap guns rather than reload a gun while in combat as it is quicker when playing the games myself. Although I still can't quite move around the controller sticks and make myself harder to hit unlike many of the streamers here- which is quite annoying"

- Excerpt from research diary

Furthermore, as highlighted in the auto-ethnographic excerpt above, through spectating the gameplay of highly-skilled gamers, I learned to more successfully play the game during my own leisure time. This demonstrates how ‘everyday’ players intentionally or otherwise draw on professional play, with e-sports and streams exposing high-level routines and practices to spectators, who in turn then emulate this in their own everyday play of the same games (e.g. Egliston 2019, 2020b; Taylor 2012). Specifically, I reflect on the complicated, antagonistic relations that come from being unable to replicate the actions of highly-skilled players in my own play, noting my frustration in being unable to effectively move my avatar, thereby illustrating the body’s limits within a wider, ongoing process of mediated individuation (Egliston 2020b). However, while research in game studies has attended to the emergent affects of gameplay, in Chapter 9 this research also attends to the long-term social effects that result from the sense of immersion produced through these games, including the aforementioned affects of nostalgia that are part of the ‘attention economy’ or ‘retention economy’ of videogames (e.g. Ash 2010, 2013; Shaw and Warf 2009).



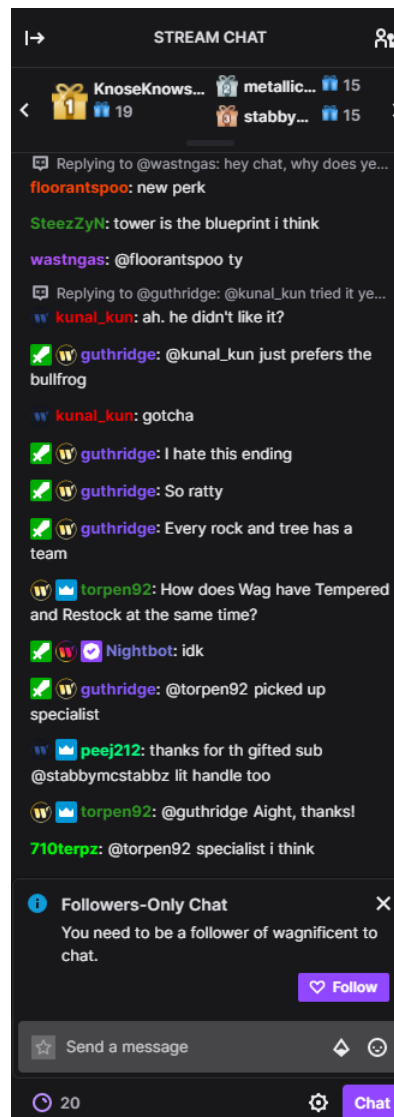


Figure 17: Screenshots from a Twitch stream of *Call of Duty: Warzone* showing the streamer twisting gameplay mechanics to their advantage, and viewers in the chat window talking to each other.

As seen in *Figure 17*, viewers frequently ask these (typically) experienced, knowledgeable players about their particular gameplay, strategy and equipment. For instance, in this broadcast, the streamer talked about and showed how they used the circle closing in as a strategic tool with their team-mate by leaving the enemy player who is trapped outside of it to die. This instance of highly-skilled gameplay, this being the manipulation of game mechanics to the streamer's own advantage – typically referred to as a practice of meta-gaming (Boluk and LeMieux 2017) - can then be taken on and emulated by viewers, just as I have done myself in my own gameplay. Additionally, in the chat window a few of the viewers can also be seen talking about how the streamer is able to use two perks, i.e. special in-game abilities. This illustrates how these Twitch streams due to their affordances for communication also allow for

ludic collaboration - the talking and strategising before, during and after their virtual firefights
- a practice that is key to winning ludic war (Payne 2010).



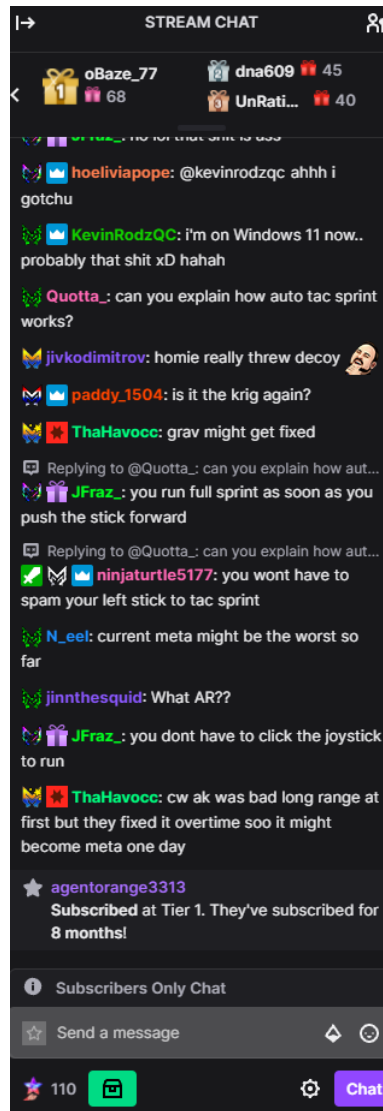


Figure 18: Screenshots from a Twitch stream of *Call of Duty: Warzone* and the chat window in which viewers are sharing game knowledge.

As found throughout ethnographic fieldwork in this digital space, and as shown in *Figure 18*, viewers in the chat often shared their own gaming knowledge with each other, usually corresponding to the streamer's gameplay. In this instance, viewers discussed how and why console players should enable the 'auto tac' setting - short for Auto Tactical Sprint - in their own gameplay. Here a few of the viewers explain how instead of constantly needing to click in the thumb-stick to sprint, an action which is physically hard on players' hands, players can simply move forward while standing to make their character automatically activate tactical sprint. This then demonstrates how stream assemblages enable the constitution of social groupings, with streams acting as a site for ludic collaboration, as viewers support each other in developing their game knowledge, thereby increasing their capacity to better negotiate the

bodily tensions that may then result in their own gameplay. Or in other words, viewers train each other as capable, digital ‘soldier-citizens’. This further speaks to the affective dimensions of these videogames, the materiality of the body and why it is useful to think of young gamers as assemblages in and of themselves, as it enables us to fully capture the complexity of these ludic assemblages and understand how their subjectivities are mutually shaped through processes of “Empire”. As such, this research builds on the likes of Bos (2018a) who have engaged with individuals’ gaming experiences, in identifying how young gamers work both individually as first-bodies politic, as well as communally as second-bodies politic in co-constituting Twitch stream communities through social practices like ludic collaboration. Additionally, through the lens of Bourdieu (1983), this exchange of game knowledge within the stream can be seen as a way for viewers to gain cultural capital in the gaming scene, with the streamer imbued with symbolic power due to their highly-developed skills. This is significant in considering how these ludic assemblages may be generative of symbolic violence, especially in the reproduction of hegemonic discourses within the gaming technoculture - as expanded on further in Chapter 7. However, now the final focus of this chapter is on the affective labour of streamers.

6.7 Streamers of Twitch Streams

To understand how streamers of Battle Royale videogames animate “Empire”, it is first important to recognise the embodied dimensions of professional and aspiring streamers performing emotional, affective and immaterial labour in transforming play into work. As Woodcock and Johnson (2019a) write, such work - beyond that of playing the games - also necessitates a digitally mediated outward countenance, with the streamer needing to be compelling to watch and friendly to viewers, as they solicit donations, foster parasocial intimacy with spectators and engage audiences through humour. In these broadcasts, streamers draw on their gameplay skills and personality in performing as a ‘character’. This may simply be a more animated version of ‘themselves’, but for some involves taking on a new theatrical persona. As outlined in the previous chapter, by generating feeling in viewers, and ushering a sense of intimacy with them, streamers can successfully produce and manipulate affects to better monetise their content (Woodcock and Johnson 2019a). Furthermore, the social activities of streamers also stretch to other digital platforms, as maintaining an almost constant online presence is a part of many streamers’ playbour both in and outside of

livestreaming (Johnson 2021). While as discussed in more detail in the previous chapter, livestreaming is an intimate, embodied, gendered and arguably erotic practice taking place in domestic settings (Ruberg and Lark 2021), with the everyday lives and spaces in which they inhabit become entangled with their work (Woodcock and Johnson 2019a).

Significantly, these everyday labour practices of Twitch streaming have been shaped by a “neoliberal subjectivity” that depends on the entrepreneurship of the self, equating success as the result of hard work via the volume of hours streamed per week (Johnson and Woodcock 2019b). Therefore, the immaterial labour done through streaming can be considered as an extensions of processes of “Empire”, as another mode of productivity and exploitability (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009, 2021). Streaming is precarious and unstable work instructive of the gig economy (Johnson and Woodcock 2019b), and has been highlighted in the media for causing streamers stress and other mental health issues (Powell 2022). As found throughout fieldwork, streamers often talked about being tired as a result of playing long hours. Thus, even though streamers could be seen in some ways as exploiting their viewers through the power relations created through these para-social bonds – especially in the promotion of gambling as I discuss later in Chapter 9 – they themselves are still subject to and exploited by “Empire”, as the consumption/production of creative content takes priority over social and ecological reproduction.



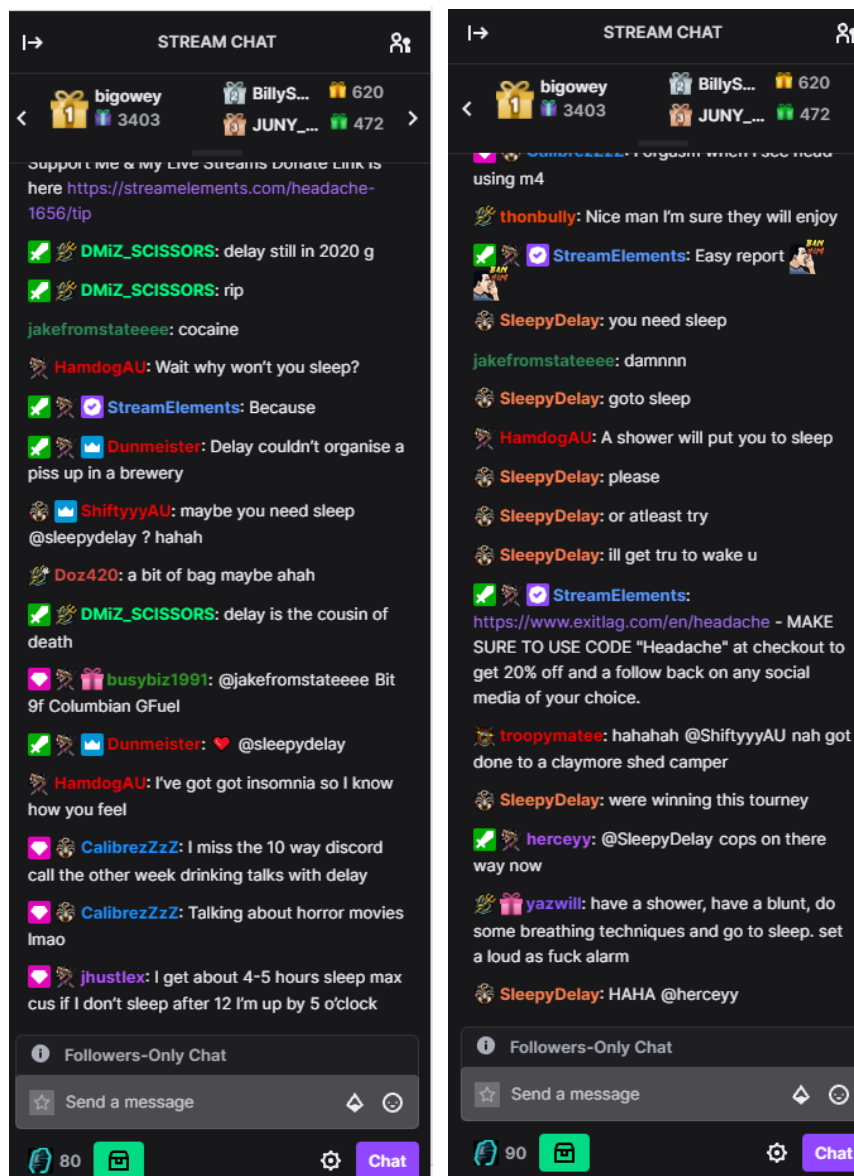


Figure 19: Screenshots of a Twitch stream of *Call of Duty: Warzone* showing the streamer and viewers in a discussion about him wanting to try get some sleep before a tournament.

In one case, as shown in *Figure 19* above, an Australian streamer discussed their worries about getting enough sleep before a tournament, as while it took place in America from mid-day, due to the difference in time zones it meant that he would start competing from midnight into the early morning. This then illustrates the negative affects of this playbour on streamers' bodies and how digital media increasingly reconfigures everyday lives and routines (Boluk and LeMieux 2017) under this new hyper-capitalist mode of "Empire". Nonetheless, it also underscores the vitality of the homosocial bonds constructed between the viewer and streamer through practices of streaming. In particular, it demonstrates how these stream assemblages generate affects of empathy from viewers through these social relations, with

one viewer stating “I’ve got insomnia so I know how you feel”, and other viewers giving the streamer advice and/or telling them to go get some sleep. Thus, viewers can be thought of as simultaneously engaging in an ethics of care (see McLean et al. 2023 for a study of this practice on TikTok) and a form of ludic collaboration with the streamer, in preparing the streamer to successfully perform ludic war in this tournament. I contend that this speaks to the emancipatory, multitudinous potentials of live-streaming, as despite becoming integral to this new phase of hyper-capitalist domination under “Empire”, equally these digital spaces can enable the formation of new, transnational social groups who come together in negotiating its harmful, exploitative processes. To summarise, these stream assemblages are continually productive of a variety of affects that enable the (re)constitution of these social groups (Dittmer 2013b), but also highlight both the ambiguous nature of (game)play within everyday life, in further blurring the lines between play/work (Yee 2006) and mutually reconfiguring “Empire” through its multitudinous potentials.

Nonetheless, while previous research has explored how practices of immaterial playbour are instructive of the ludocapitalistic processes in engendering streamers as neoliberal subjects, by engaging with popular geopolitical scholarship this study also explores how streams of Battle Royale games that work as forms of militainment also configure them as militarised subjects. In doing so, this research fills a lacuna in geographical scholarship, where very little attention has been paid to the geographies of livestreaming and spectating, as well as the geopolitical dimensions of this new form of immaterial playbour. For instance, as Johnson and Woodcock (2019b) point out some of the most popular and successful streamers have one million plus ‘followers’ and frequently attract tens of thousands of viewers per stream, thereby demonstrating the technical affordances of Twitch and agency of streamers through their embodied, affective playbour to gain substantial visibility and (digital) celebrity status. In thinking of streamers as celebrities and Twitch as a form of social media - as discussed further in Chapter 7 - it is important then to explore the political agency and symbolic power of streamers, as well as the circulation of geopolitical discourses within such spaces (Adams 2015; Benwell et al. 2012). Indeed, in an illustration of their social agency, streamers are often involved in efforts to raise considerable amounts of money for charity - with for instance in 2018, many high profile *Fortnite* streamers helping raise money as part of a charity marathon to support research into child cancer (Messner 2018). In doing so, streamers further illuminate

the ambiguity of streaming/play and its transformative, positive potentials. Building on these ideas, this research considers how even mundane and banal practices of everyday life, like the streaming and spectating of videogames, have become inherent to “‘‘Empire’’”, as well as hints at their multitudinous potential to also destabilise it (Hardt and Negri 2000, 2004). In particular, as I explore further in Chapter 9, I add to our current understandings of “Empire” by exploring how as the distinctions between play and work dissipate further, young people through processes of videogaming, livestreaming and spectating are (differentially) subjected to and exploited through new modes of capitalist domination.

6.8 Concluding Remarks

This chapter has focused on the young gamers themselves in attending to the various ways through which they co-constitute, engage with and negotiate geopolitics in everyday life through the playing, streaming and spectating of Battle Royale videogames and streams. In examining how videogames and the gaming scene has continued to be a part of their life course, this chapter has argued that videogames should be understood in relation to their shifting, everyday contexts for a greater insights into their ambiguous qualities. Through an engagement with materialities and the body, this chapter has outlined how videogames are generative of embodied affects of immersion, playfulness and nostalgia, which in turn are instructive of the attention economy of videogaming and the (re)production of young gamers’ subjectivities as consumers. Furthermore, this chapter has considered how young people have various levels of engagement with videogames and the wider gaming scene, illustrating the complex, fluid identity of ‘the gamer’. This chapter then looked at how the spectators and streamers conduct several social practices in, and negotiate the affects of, Battle Royale Twitch streams. In doing so, this chapter considers the para-social relations that form between them, such as through practices of ludic collaboration, in addition to the ways in which this immaterial playbour is shaped by neo-liberal discourses and affects streamers’ bodies. As such, this chapter has foregrounded young people’s voices, while also recognising how agency is distributed throughout ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and streams, as young gamers, spectators and streamers, individually and collaboratively, negotiate their entanglements with multitudinous processes of “Empire” and the resultant affects/effects.

Having outlined the geographies of the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and streams in the previous chapter, and now in this chapter the young gamers, viewers and streams who co-constitute them, the following three chapters will build on the arguments presented here in thinking more about how young gamers and ludic assemblages are co-constitutive of “Empire”. Chapter 7 will attend to the humourous and toxic dimensions of these ludic assemblages. Chapter 8 will engage with the complex political subjectivities of young gamers. Lastly, Chapter 9 will focus on notions of violence and addiction in relation to (Battle Royale) videogames.

Chapter 7: Humour and Toxicity in Ludic Assemblage

This chapter attends to the humorous and toxic dimensions of the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and streams in exploring how they are instructive of a hyper-masculine, militarised gaming technoculture, which is in turn co-constitutive of Hardt and Negri's (2000, 2004) "Empire". After first outlining the geographical scholarship on humour and laughter, this chapter through a number of examples, charts the distinct humour that emerges through streaming (Johnson 2022) and its importance to the affective labour of streamers. However, in considering how gameplay is regulated through discourses of domination (Payne 2010), this chapter will then turn to how the same assemblages are productive of and transformed by affects of toxicity. Here it will also illuminate the ways in which affects of toxicity and humour resonate, offset and entwine with each other throughout the event of the stream, demonstrating how both affects shape and enable the emergence of these homosocial, militaristic assemblages. As such, this chapter will make evident the transformative or multitudinous potential of humour and play as these assemblages oscillate in subverting and submitting to "Empire" - showing the need for 'serious' engagements with play (Horton 2018; Woodyer 2018). Building on this, the focus will then be on how young gamers and streamers deal with the affects of toxic behaviours, chiefly discrimination, which have historically structured this gaming technoculture. Ultimately, this chapter highlights how young people who play, watch and broadcast *Call of Duty: Warzone* and other Battle Royale games and streams enact several subjectivities that are in turn co-constitutive of 'everyday' geopolitics and inherent to processes of "Empire".

7.1 Understanding Humour

As noted in the literature review, within popular geopolitics, scholars have recently begun to address notions of humour, satire and irony, in analysing how a range of political cartoons and comics, television shows, popular literature and comedy acts as arenas for geopolitical humour and satire (e.g. Dodds and Kirby 2013; Holland and Levy 2018; Purcell et al. 2010; Ridanpää 2009, 2014; Saunders 2008). Much of this work has been influenced by MacPherson's (2008) conceptualisations of humour and laughter, in turn shaped by her research with members of specialist blind and visually impaired walking groups in the Lake District and the Peak District of Britain. In examining how humour and laughter disclose, articulate and translate a complex

array of emotions, senses, relationships and spatialities, she then heuristically distinguishes between these two connected phenomena. Pertinently, Macpherson (2008) describes humour as a particular shared sense or cognition, while laughter, a muscular phenomenon which interrupts breathing, is an at times involuntary response and a complex affect with contagious and excessive qualities. Or as Dittmer (2013b) elucidates through the lens of assemblage theory and Protevi's 'bodies politic', humour is social, while laughter is somatic. Furthermore, Dittmer divides humour into three main heuristic categories. One is the superiority approach where humour is believed to develop from some kind of dominance of others thus reproducing hegemonic binaries. The second is the incongruity approach, where humour is created by the breaking down or exceeding of 'the gap' between reality and imaginings. The third is relief humour, which is used to address unconsciously repressed thoughts, resulting in the release of laughter in the form of excess energy. Finally, as Dittmer (2013b) explains, whether something is funny or not is dependent on the affiliations of communities. As I discuss in this chapter, this is important in considering how much of the humour that emerges in the gaming scene is indicative of a distinct, homosocial technoculture.

In exploring the relations between geopolitics and humour, geographers and others have looked at how comedic content makes geopolitics intelligible, enables the construction of geopolitical subjectivities, or can even unsettle hegemonic discourse. For instance, Ridanpää (2009) explores the controversies surrounding the twelve satirical cartoons of the prophet Muhammed published in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* and a comic strip in a minor Finnish journal that satirically questioned the Muhammed cartoon episode and the political hypocrisy of the Finnish government. Here Ridanpää emphasises the constructive and destructive political potential of humour, attending to how the satirical cartoons of *Jyllands-Posten* through superiority humour reproduced Orientalist discourses, in addition to the ways in which the Finnish comic strip contested the geopolitical code of Finlandisation. Similarly, Thorogood (2016) examines the show *South Park* and argues that its satire combines bodily and scatological humour with more traditional satirical techniques to produce a comedy that mocks contemporary issues by reducing complex politics to the most basic and crass condition possible. In doing so, Thorogood then highlights the significance of bodily, vulgar humour and affect as a site through which geopolitics is negotiated and experienced ambiguously. This work illustrates how the popular and the political are co-constituted through social practices

of inter-textuality, where what is seen as funny or not is contingent on its social, cultural and geopolitical context. Again, as I discuss later in this chapter, the humour and laughter that emerges through the streaming and playing of ludic war is often very specific to the gaming technoculture and frequently encompasses crude, somatically-related humour.

Increasingly, like much of the popular geopolitical scholarship, attention has shifted away from a focus on mass-mediated humour to instead engage more with instances of geopolitical humour in everyday life. A key example of this work, which also pertinently builds on feminist geopolitical scholarship, is Van Ramhorst's (2019) ethnographic study of the everyday lives of migrants in transit from Central America to the United States, in which they encounter new, intensifying security and border control practices in Mexico and the US, as well as other forms of brutality on their journeys. Nevertheless, in seeking to account for the complexity of these experiences of migration and provide a counternarrative to descriptions based solely around tragedy and violence, he emphasises migrants' emotional and affective uses of humour. Significantly, Van Ramhorst (2019: 903) thinks of humour "as an outward emotional expression, through instances of joking and laughter, and an affective orientation that opens individuals towards spaces of play and amusement" - a useful conceptualisation that this work takes forward in exploring the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale games and streams. Subsequently, Van Ramhorst details the ways Central American migrants deploy humour as an emotional and affective coping mechanism in negotiating their precarious journeys northwards, thus in turn generating spaces of collective solidarity as they come together in making light of their illegality and immobility in transit. For instance, he outlines the ways in which migrants often mocked immigration officials and derided the geopolitical conditions of their journeys in a mixture of both incongruity and relief humour. Thus, Van Ramhorst illustrates the complexity of these experiences of migration as being both undeniably saturated by violence and brutality, but also imbued with joking and laughter. Just as Van Ramhorst highlights how humour, play and violence are part of these migrants' journeys, I later attend to the contradictory affects produced through ludic war/violence in Battle Royale videogames and streams - where through play, even violence itself becomes a source of humour.

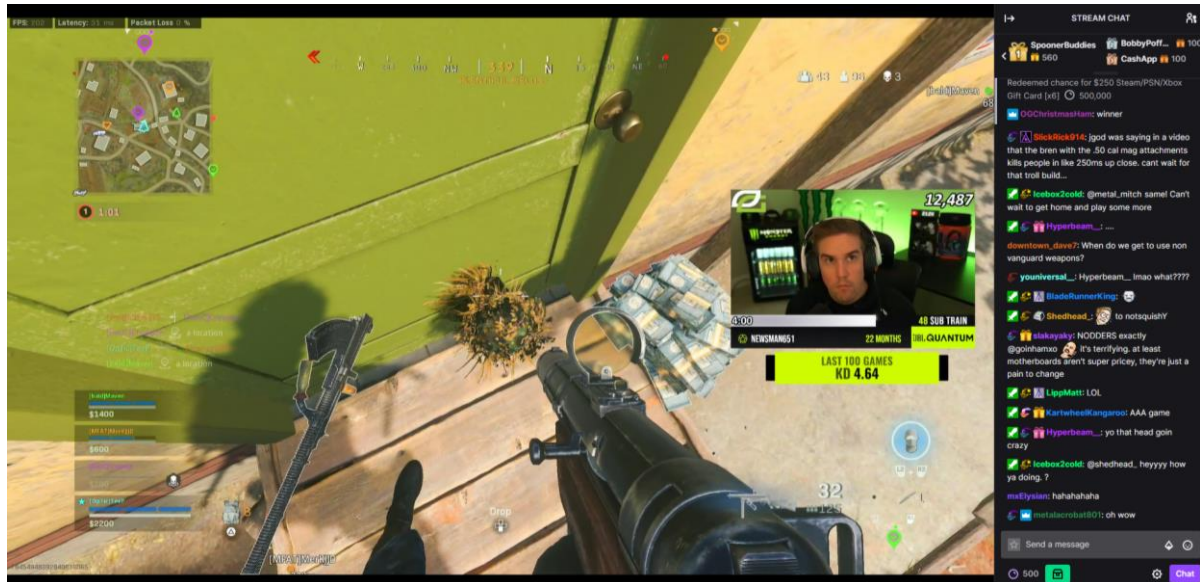
Likewise, Gerlofs (2022) uses ethnographic methods to study everyday political life in Mexico City, in exploring the geopolitical and geographical dimensions of humour in shaping the aesthetic and affective processes involved in the construction and contestation of urban identities. In highlighting the ambiguous qualities of humour as being its source of power, and referring to Ranciere's work on the relations between politics and aesthetics in their concept of 'the distribution of the sensible', Gerlofs discusses examples of humorous transgressions that critically and creatively contest such partitions. Here he charts how both citizens and activists through satire and vulgar humour in the form of a YouTube video, a wooden statue used to represent a patron saint against gentrification, and a hypothetical interview with the city's mayor, each challenged elite political actors and supported local, democratic processes. In doing so, he shows how the subversive potential of humour can enable simultaneous or co-constitutive aesthetic effects, in both disrupting political norms and facilitating an emergent, more inclusive, spatial imaginary of urban citizenship. Building on Gerlofs' ideas on the relations between humour and politics, I later consider the aesthetics of what is seen as political/serious, as well as what is seen as fun/humorous in Twitch stream assemblages and the wider gaming scene.

Finally and most pertinently, Dittmer (2013b) has further explored the affective potential for humour and laughter to remake (geopolitical) subjectivities in the virtual diplomatic assemblages of role-playing simulations of *Model United Nations* (MUN). Here he comments how previous work had focused too much on highly-mediated satire and irony, critiquing it for reproducing hegemonic discourse and not enabling the production of alternative imaginings. Following this, Dittmer explains how the three categories of humour; superiority, incongruity and relief; emerged, intertwined and circulated throughout these virtual diplomatic assemblages. Superiority humour emerged from caricaturing the Other (the global South). Relief laughter emerged from the parodying of global inequality itself. Lastly, incongruity humour emerged through playfully testing and circumventing the formal procedures via over-voting or even proposing marriage to the chair of a *MUN* conference. Remarking that humour can both re-inscribe differences between social groups and enable the constitution of those same groups, Dittmer surmises that subcultural humour plays an important role in producing alternative diplomacies in the experimental spaces of *MUN*. The next section of this chapter extends on Dittmer's ideas, examining the subcultural humour of the gaming scene and its

geopolitical relations, in engaging with the sub-communities formed around streamers of Battle Royale videogames as second-bodies politic.

7.2. Humorous Assemblages

Twitch stream assemblages produce a variety of affects as the streamer looks to produce a fun and entertaining experience for viewers for the purpose of monetising their playbour, with Twitch infrastructure enabling the circulation of these affects through other (human) bodies that then become territorialised/immersed in the stream assemblage. In particular, affects of humour play a key role in the emergence and coherence of many of these stream assemblages. However, humour is more than just being a way for streamers to engage with audiences as part of the digitally-mediated outward countenance of streaming (Woodcock and Johnson 2019a). As Johnson (2022) discusses, this 'stream-humour' takes many forms and is complex in nature. To begin with, there is the general humour that comes from acting playfully whether that be for the purposes of amusement or subversion. Next there is 'game-humour' that arises directly from a game's design or indirectly through combinations of unpredictable actions, the game's mechanics and the player's responses to these ludic elements. Importantly, this also includes the humour that results from the obscure but diverse litany of jokes, memes and references found in gaming spaces, as well as the humour exhibited from aggressive, hostile, negative, snarky or sarcastic attitudes and behaviours that are exacerbated in part by the anonymity and competitiveness of gaming spaces. Likewise, there is Internet humour, the 'dark', 'gallows' or 'black' humour that may emerge through practices such as trolling enabled by users' anonymity, which here extends beyond specific platforms and is a constant backdrop for those who frequently participate in social online spaces. Finally at this intersection of the three forms, stems an emergent and idiosyncratic 'stream-humour', characterised by its relations with other forms of humour, the distinctive elements produced through the practices of the *Twitch* streamer(s) and viewers and the affordances and infrastructure of the platform itself. Subsequently, like Johnson (2022), I explore the range of origins, backgrounds and expressions through which stream-humour takes place, examine the role of Twitch itself in its formation and the development of stream-humour as a distinctive register. However, in building on this work together with the literature in popular/everyday geopolitics, I examine how the various instances of this unique, stream-humour work in defining and constituting social groups and consider its geopolitical dimensions.



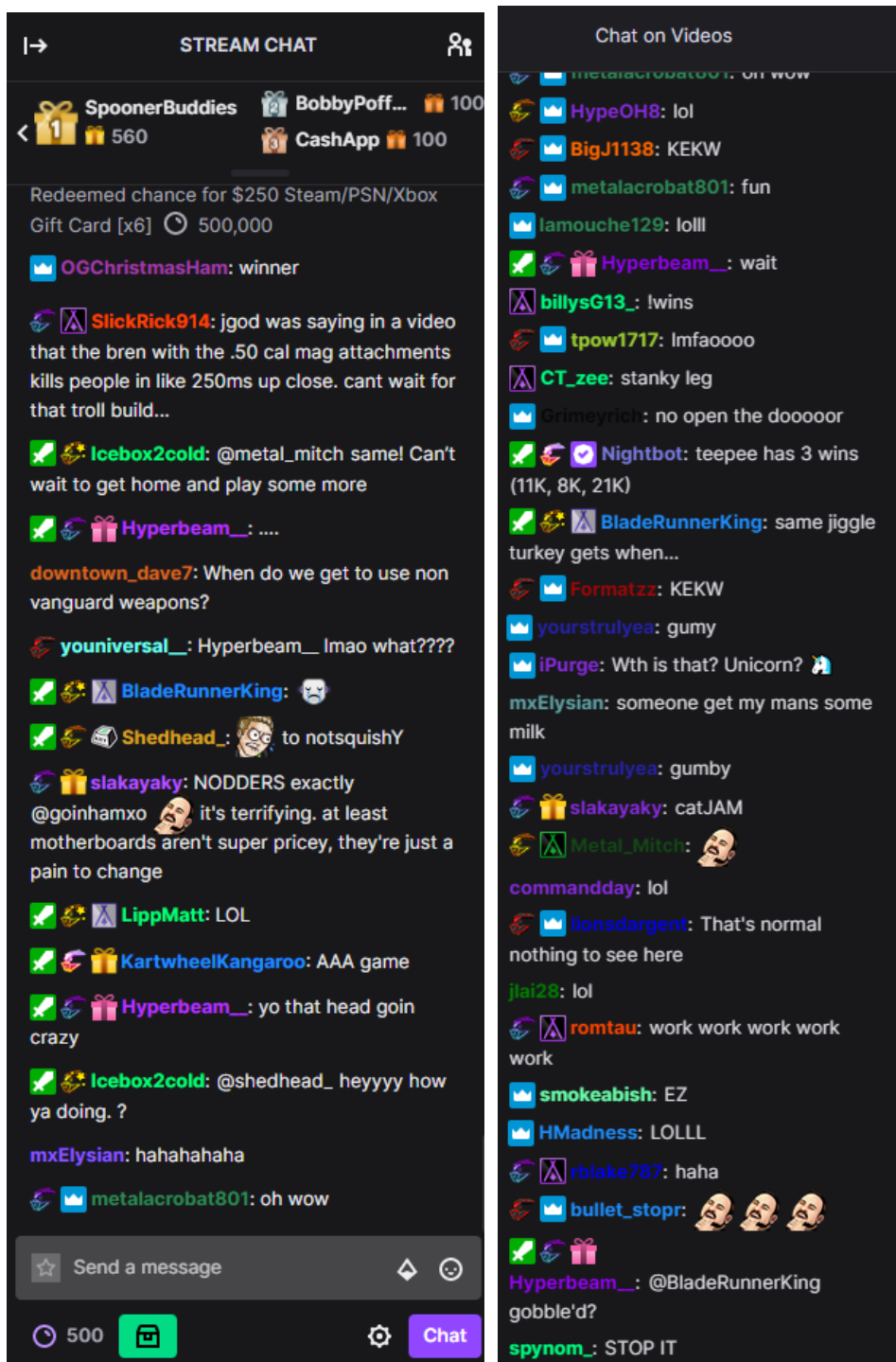


Figure 20: Images from a Twitch stream showing the streamer and viewers laughing at the 'glitching' of a dead enemies' body in the door during a game of *Call of Duty: Warzone*.

As found throughout ethnographic fieldwork in these ludic assemblages, this 'stream-humour' took on a variety of forms emerging in a range of contexts and encounters. As shown above in Figure 20, one potent example of this 'stream-humour' emerged during a livestream of *Call of Duty: Warzone* where a dead body became 'glitched' - a software fault within the game

assemblage - within a door. An example of incongruity 'game' humour, it emerged through a combination of unpredictable actions, the game's system and the player's response to these ludic elements - combinations that are not typically afforded by other forms of media (Johnson 2022). The comedic potential of this moment can be seen by the reaction of the streamer who was amused and offered a wry smile to the camera, while playfully moving inside and outside the building and looking at the glitching body. This humorous affect circulated throughout the stream assemblage, as shown by responses in the chat, with uses of words- and corresponding emotes- that signify laughter including "HAHA", "KEKW"⁴ and "LMAO" (laughing my ass off). This example of a humorous encounter is particularly pertinent as 'glitching', engenders an antagonistic affect to the sense of immersion that these games are designed to produce. The disruptive affect in this case would be the breaking of the 'real-life' laws of physics that these games are supposed to emulate, i.e. the decoding of the co-constitutive ludic assemblage of gameplay. Yet, while glitches tend to cause frustration and anger for players by breaking the sense of immersion, in this instance the glitch instead acted as source of incongruity humour. As such, this instance highlights the indeterminate nature of assemblages and how the affects of gameplay upon the body are not predefined (Ash 2010b). Significantly, as I will discuss in more detail in the next chapter, this episode also poses questions about how the affective and representational qualities of these games and streams resonated in such a way to provoke laughter at ludic war, as it underscores the ambiguous qualities of violence and play and the relations between the two phenomena.

Importantly, to return to Johnson's (2022) article this instance also acts as an illustration of the ways in which the Twitch chat window takes a prominent role in shaping the 'stream-humour' in how it enables the rapid collective production, circulation and consumption of jokes, references and ideas between individual stream communities. As they emerge, these specific in-jokes, references and behaviours then work to further constitute and define these social groupings or second-bodies politic. Within the chat window much of this stream-humour comes from the use of 'emotes', the small images that viewers post in chat, which play a key role in Twitch culture as both an extension of the streaming persona and part of the collective

⁴ The term "KEKW" originates from a mix of *World of Warcraft* references and a famous Spanish video of a comedian laughing that went viral in meme culture and has since become one of the most popular emotes on Twitch, thus, acting as an illustration of stream humour

vernacular. These emotes, which often contain comedic images or specific meanings help viewers to quickly and more easily articulate their feelings. For instance, as shown in Figure 20, several viewers have typed into the chat the LUL (Lame Uncomfortable Laugh) Twitch emote, which is used to express laughter and joy and depicts the late streamer, *TotalBiscuit* who was well-known within the gaming scene. Due to his familiarity among viewers this emote then also works to re-constitute this shared gaming identity. Nevertheless, as Johnson (2022) remarks, it should be recognised that some of the most popular emotes often come with political connotations. For example, the FeelsBadMan or FeelsGoodMan emotes - used by viewers to express a feeling of deep sadness or joy respectively - are based on the longstanding comic character and internet meme Pepe the Frog, which had been appropriated as a hate symbol by the alt-right during the 2016 US presidential election (Alexander 2018; Hernandez 2021). As such, some of these emotes further illustrate the relations between geopolitics and humour, and thus the geopolitical dimensions of these Twitch streams - in particular the rise of playful, alt-right in digital/gaming spaces (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2021). This is why, as I explore further in this section, it is crucial to consider how this humour is co-constituted through a wider assemblage of popular culture.

7.2.1 'Stream-Humour', Digital Technology and Popular Culture



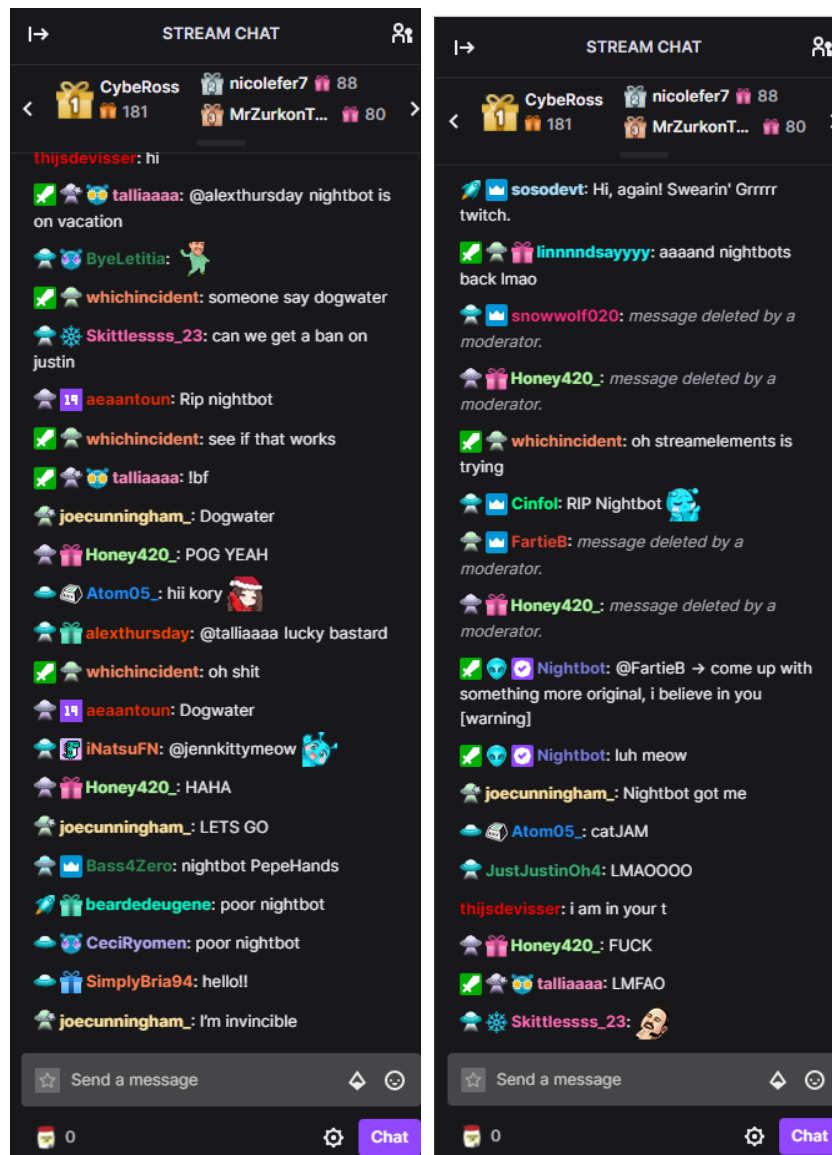


Figure 21: Screenshots showing viewers in a Twitch stream of *Fortnite* joking about the ‘death’ of the night-bot and its ‘revival’.

As I have already discussed this idiosyncratic ‘stream-humour’ comes in many forms and emerges in a variety of ways, including like the instance shown above in *Figure 21*. As discussed in Chapter 5, there was an incident in which several Twitch services were affected due to a system error, with streamers being unable to read the chat window before the website itself stopped working for a few minutes. As streams recommenced the nightbot was temporarily disabled, leading to viewers in the chat joking that it had died, before then causing laughter and surprise among viewers once it had been re-enabled and deleted a few messages. This episode is instructive of how non-human actants involved in the stream assemblage can inadvertently become a source of humour, while also illustrating how agency is distributed

across these stream assemblages. Specifically, it can be thought of as provoking relief laughter among viewers as they realised that Twitch was again working properly and so they could return to watching the stream as normal without any more issues that disrupt their entertainment. Likewise, it can also be considered as a form of incongruity humour, as the nightbot which has long been an anthropomorphised figure within gaming spaces, was comically mourned as if it was a real person that had died before then ‘coming back to life’. Thus, this incident is indicative of the ways in which affordances and infrastructure of the Twitch itself can help make up this distinctive stream humour, and how three categories of humour combine and interact within this subculture (Johnson 2022). This is important in considering later how humour itself is constitutive of the (geopolitical) subjectivities of the first-bodies politic of young gamers and second-bodies politics of these stream communities, and thus shapes how they come to engage with politics, be that humorously and/or seriously.

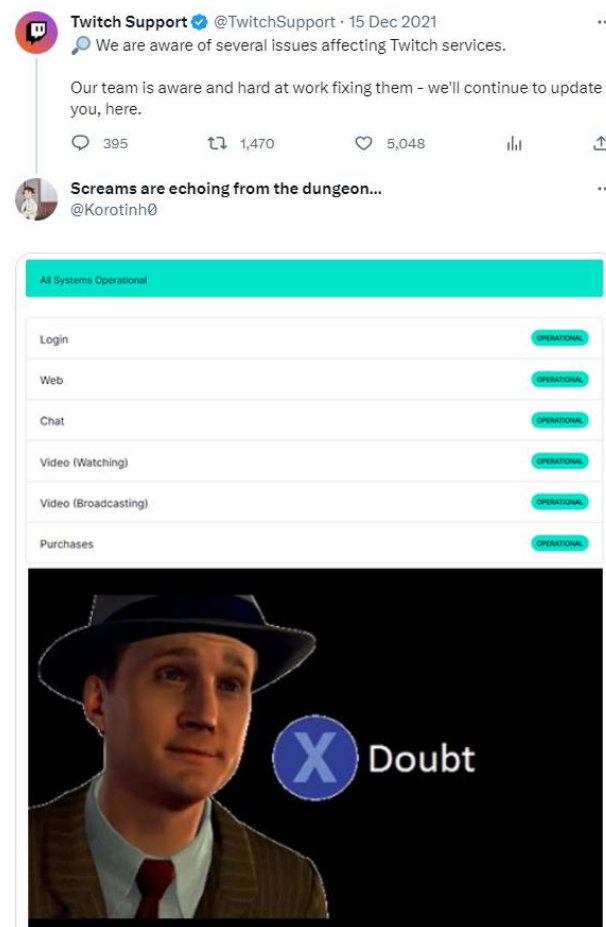


Figure 22: Screenshot from Twitter of a user replying to the Twitch support account.

Significantly, as demonstrated in *Figure 22* above, this distinct stream humour also extends outwards on social media. Here following this episode in which Twitch had stopped working, among several complaints, other users made jokes and circulated memes in the replies to the official Twitch support account. This includes replies like the one above in which one user combines a screenshot from the Twitch website showing all systems were operational, with the “X to doubt” meme. This meme is constructed from the reaction image of the LAPD detective Cole Phelps from the action-adventure game *L.A. Noire* and is used to express extreme scepticism about the truth of a given statement or comment. This then is another instance of incongruity humour of a snarky bent that is typical of the gaming technoculture, one which extends across Twitch and other related digital spaces as part of a wider media assemblage, with humour being the affective “glue” that holds together and enables the constitution of this complex community and these ludic assemblages (Ghoddousi and Page 2020).



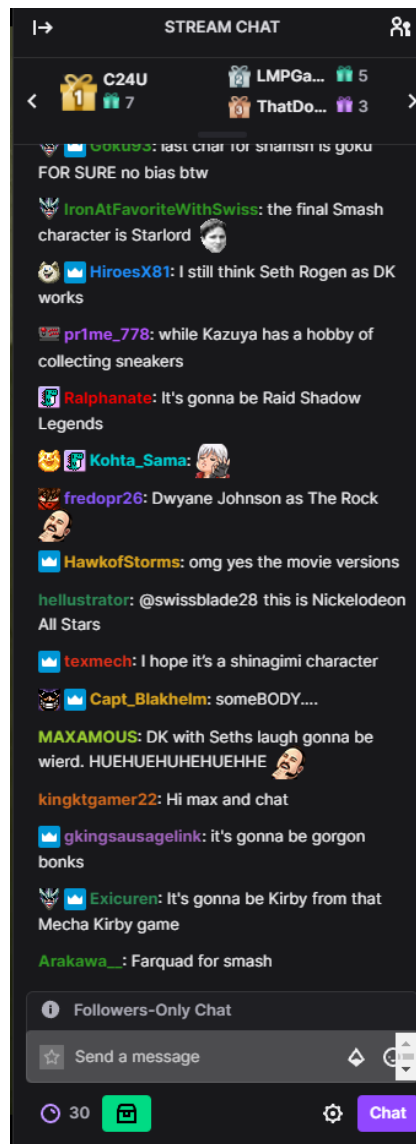


Figure 23: Screenshots showing viewers in a variety streamer's broadcast of *Call of Duty: Warzone* on Twitch making references to various elements of popular culture.

Chats and streams often have discussions based around various forms of media, not just videogames, with this assemblage of popular culture often acting as another source of humour that enables the emergence of these ludic assemblages – like that shown above in *Figure 23*. In this example, a variety streamer (one who broadcasts different genres of games) and viewers are discussing who the final new character would be for *Smash Bros Ultimate*⁵. This included a number of playful suggestions, many of which were related to the then recently

⁵ *Smash Bros Ultimate* is a platform fighting game in which the player can control a character from a roster including Nintendo mascots like Mario, Pikachu and Zelda as well as other figures from third-party franchises like Sonic the Hedgehog or Pac-Man.

announced *The Super Mario Bros. Movie* which stars both the actor Chris Pratt (who also played Star-Lord in the *Guardians of the Galaxy* series) as Mario, and Seth Rogen as Donkey Kong. Significantly, this is a further development of how cultural properties, titles and themes are traded between cinema, comics and video games as part of a convergent entertainment complex (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009: xvi) - or to follow Dittmer (2015a), part of a wider assemblage of popular culture. Subsequently, the viewers can be seen as performing practices of intertextual referencing, using the affective reservoir of humour that is the wider assemblage of popular culture to display their high levels of cultural capital and knowledge to 'get a laugh out' of other viewers, and ideally also the streamer. Firstly, this illustrates Taylor's (2018) point that an individuals' media and leisure practices take place on and traverse the multiple platforms and communities that comprise a wider assemblage of popular culture. Secondly, this demonstrates how the first-bodies politic or individual body acts as a somatic archive, where a viewers' cultural subjectivity is shaped by their interactions with media (Dittmer 2015a). However, I look to extend on this idea further in arguing that this second-bodies politic (of the steam sub-community) should also be considered as a somatic archive, where stream humour is constructed in part from references to certain elements of popular culture that enables the (re)production of those same groups who are familiar with this content. This is important in considering how the political subjectivities of these communities or second-bodies politic are in part shaped through their encounters with this broader assemblage of popular culture – a notion I explore further in the next chapter – but also the significance of this humour for streamer's playbour, as I come to next.

7.2.2 Homosocial and Humorous Assemblages



Figure 24: Screenshots showing the streamer and viewers in a Twitch stream of *Fortnite* expressing their 'love' to one another.

Indeed, this unique stream-humour proves to be significant in the production and maintenance of the para-social bonds built between the streamer and their viewers, with streamers often expressing love for their community - as shown in Figure 24 above. As discussed in Chapter 6, this “love” that is expressed by streamers to viewers and vice versa tends to be homosocial in nature and is used by the former to create a sense of intimacy between themselves and their audiences. As Bos (2018a) writes, videogames such as *Warzone*, through their communicative potentials, enable individuals to reinforce social relationships in the form of masculine bonding as they perform the practices of militarised domination and competition that are imperative to ludic war. Nonetheless, it also should be acknowledged that these practices occur in non-military themed videogames as seen in the above example. Therefore, I argue that Battle Royale Twitch streams can be seen as an extension of these practices of masculine bonding, where the intimate, para-social relations that emerge between the streamer and viewer(s) are used for the purpose of monetising their playbour. In particular, this can be found in how streamers often expressed feelings of love and gratitude in response to donations and subscriptions to their channel. Thus, just like e-sports, livestreaming as a form of professional gaming, encompasses appropriating hegemonic, subordinate and counterhegemonic formations of masculinity for the purpose of competitive effectivity and marketability, in effect combining to produce a neo-liberal form of masculinity (Voorhees and Orlando 2018). In other words, the streaming of Battle Royale videogames and the embodying of this neo-liberal subjectivity is instructive of how processes, practices and discourses of ludocapitalism and militainment now further intertwine to co-constitute “Empire” (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009). Indeed, I argue here that streamers of Battle Royale videogames as autonomous, networked and highly productive individuals seamlessly embody both the ‘worker-consumer’ and ‘soldier-citizen’ in their affective/immaterial playbour, subsequently exemplifying how digital play is integral to what Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2021) call “Empire”’s victory – an argument I return to again in Chapter 9.

Many streamers’ conversations with team-mates were also highly reflective of this distinct neo-liberal subjectivity, where dick jokes, sexual innuendo and other forms of vulgar, bodily humour together with homoerotic expressions of love to one another were frequent. Through such practices the body of the streamer becomes a site of affective interaction, a source of humour. As noted previously, for professional gamers to be successful in their play they need

to become attuned to processes of gameplay, which in turn necessitates a form of affective vulnerability or openness (Ash 2013). As Taylor and Chess (2018) explain, this vulnerability contradicts the hegemonic masculine ideal of an impenetrable and agential male body, especially the hyper-masculine discourses found in Battle Royale videogames, which valorise attributes like toughness, resilience and strength. In underlining the potentially queering aspects of gameplay between white straight males, Taylor and Chess usefully consider how such play involves a complex amalgam of homoeroticism and techno-eroticism. Here they consider it as a circuit in which sexual contact is at once corporally experienced as play upon the penetrated and penetrating body, even as it is remediated as hyper-masculine representations of domination and violence as players assert their heteronormativity. Yet, in streaming this (affective) vulnerability is further drawn on as streamers also employ an outward countenance and look to build a sense of intimacy with their community. Thus, professional streaming further demonstrates the tense relations between heteronormativity, masculinity and gaming, in circulating, extending and reproducing the erotic intimacy of male-on-male gaming and the queer pleasures of digital play towards a wider audience of this gaming technoculture. Or in terms of assemblage, viewers become territorialised in making this ludic assemblage through its queering affects, in turn demonstrating the power of the multitude in these new digital spaces as it acts as works within and (potentially) against the hyper-masculine, biopolitical regime of “Empire”.



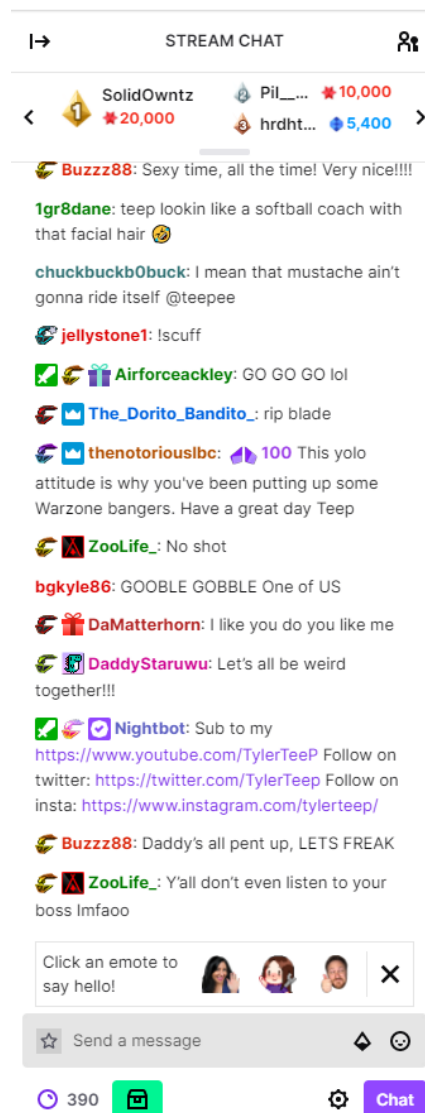


Figure 25: Screenshots of a Twitch stream of *Call of Duty: Warzone* in which viewers in the chat window are positively commenting on the streamer's appearance.

In fact, the circulation of these affective flows can be seen in how at various points during their broadcasts many male streamers were often complimented on their physical appearance, as shown above in *Figure 25*. Again this normalisation of homoerotic practices, discourse and desires with gaming spaces like Twitch streams is instructive of how military, nerd/geek and jock masculinities coalesce to form a distinct, neo-liberal masculinity. Nevertheless, I argue that this also extends to viewers of the stream themselves, as they work to continually reproduce this hyper-masculine gaming technoculture through practices of spectating. Simultaneously, however, it speaks to the potential queering nature of these ludic assemblages. Thus, in the words of Hardt and Negri (2000, 2004) this is a 'line of flight' yet to be acted on, highlighting the multitudinous potential of livestreams in terms of how they can

both animate and (potentially) destabilise “Empire”. Altogether, this illustrates the domestication of geopolitics (Woodyer and Carter 2020), as ludic war/violence becomes socially and economically embedded in people’s lives through these trans-scalar encounters, with affects of humour, ‘love’ and violence all emerging through these practices of affective labour, thus speaking to the complex, ambiguous nature of (game)play. Moreover, in the words of Hardt and Negri (2000) it attests to the multitudinous ways in which livestreaming is now enmeshed in the biopolitical fabric of “Empire” with its own constituent power that is productive of affects “beyond measure”. Yet, as I come to next, this idiosyncratic ‘stream-humour’ also needs to be understood in relation to how behaviours of toxicity and discrimination emerge in these ludic assemblages as part of the discourses of domination (Payne 2010) that co-produce a hyper-masculine gaming technoculture and ultimately “Empire” (Dyer and Witheford and de Peuter 2009)

7.3 Toxic Assemblages

Having outlined the humorous and homosocial aspects of these ludic assemblages of Twitch live-streams, in the following sections I explore how these broadcasts are also productive of and transformed through affects of toxicity. As Gandolfi and Ferdig (2022) elucidate, toxicity itself is an indefinite term that is difficult to frame for three reasons. The first is how it takes a multiplicity of expressions. The second is that what is seen as toxic is contingent on the rules of specific gaming communities. And the last reason is that it can be cyclical or reproductive in nature in terms of its affects, as for example frustrated players may engage in further negative behaviours. In recognition of this ambiguity, I therefore broadly define toxicity as an affect that emerges through a range of anti-social attitudes including misogyny, homophobia and racism, in addition to certain disruptive behaviours or practices such as cheating, spamming and trolling. As such, it is important here to consider how like Payne’s (2010) ethnographic study of a gaming café, many Twitch streams play host to tacit and explicit displays of braggadocio, machismo, sexism, racism and homophobia. Moreover, the high levels of toxicity in these Twitch streams should also be understood in relation to the rise of the alt-right and reactionary political groups in digital spaces, as hegemonic, misogynistic and racist grouping of “hard-core” gamers fight against a growing, diversifying player population and ‘progressive’ gaming industry (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2020). Likewise, as I come to later in this section some toxic behaviours are instructive of the multitudinous potential of videogames, in producing

new subjectivities that empower and/or unsettle “Empire” (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009).

Toxic, disturbing and otherwise malevolent behaviour frequently emerges in Twitch stream chats, which are in turn policed and managed according to the rules of the streamer and their channel. For instance, the streamer and/or moderators can delete messages on Twitch streams, or even ban individuals temporarily or permanently. Stream chats may also be set to follower-only or subscriber-only by the streamer for a variety of reasons, including to stop toxic behaviour such as spam messages or derogatory language. These deviant behaviours are particularly prominent on channels run by female streamers who often experience sexualised comments from certain viewers that are in sharp contrast to the homosocial expressions of love that viewers give to male streamers in terms of their intent.



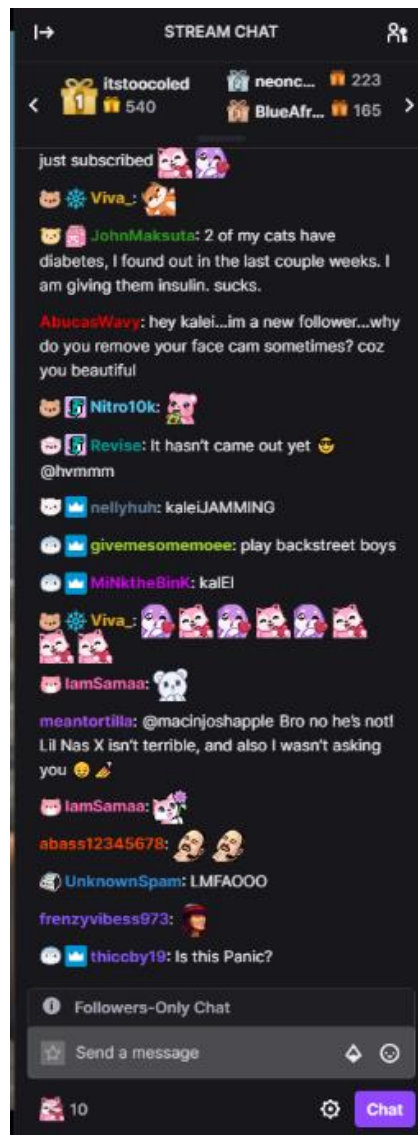


Figure 26: Screenshots of a Twitch stream of *Call of Duty: Warzone* showing the female streamer reacting to an inappropriate comment in the chat window.

An example of this toxic behaviour, as shown above in *Figure 26*, involved a viewer making inappropriate, disturbing comments about the streamer's appearance, here asking why they sometimes switched off their face camera. Afterwards, the streamer called out this viewer's message, which is then also deleted by a moderator. While the streamer is supported by many of her other viewers who call out this behaviour, showing the force of the social bonds built between the streamer and their viewers, this instance also underscores the misogynistic nature of the hyper-masculine gaming technoculture. Significantly then, it demonstrates how what is considered to be toxic is dependent on the rules of specific gaming communities (Gandolfi and Ferdig 2022), but also how these ludic assemblages are in part shaped the

identity of the streamer, especially as if this happened to a male streamer it would be laughed off and made for a humorous topic of conversation.



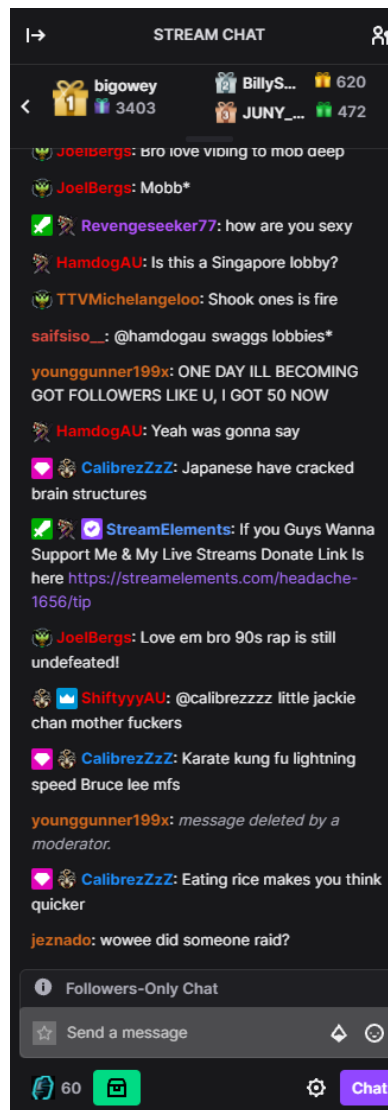


Figure 27: Screenshots of a Twitch stream in which viewers are making racist comments about Asian people.

Nonetheless, across streams of Battle Royale videogames such social transgressions are policed and managed differently, according to the rules of the streamer and their channel, as seen in *Figure 27*. In this Twitch broadcast where the streamer is playing in an Asian lobby, viewers made racist remarks about Japanese people and other Asian groups. Yet, at the same time, one viewer who is spamming - i.e. continuing to the same message repeatedly - and not actually 'properly' participating in the stream chat, has had a second message deleted by a moderator, while these racist comments remained present in the stream chat. This illustrates how racist language is generally accepted by the hyper-masculine, technoculture of Battle Royale streaming/gaming (Payne 2010), unlike spamming which is seen as a transgression. This is important when considering how what is seen as toxic and/or funny within the gaming community may in turn help shape young gamer's political subjectivities, affiliations and

engagements, in addition to the forms of symbolic violence, like derogatory language, which work to reproduce this hyper-masculine, racialised gaming technoculture.



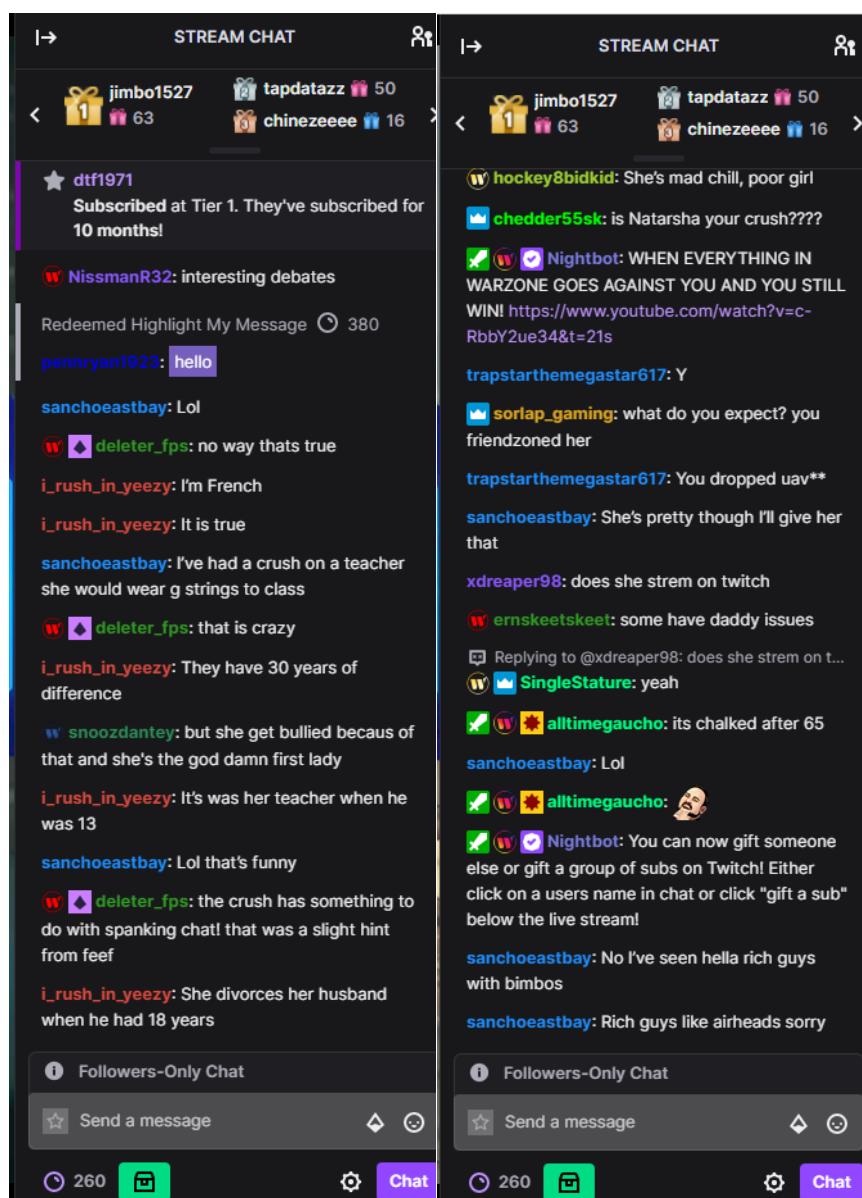


Figure 28: Screenshots of viewers in a Twitch stream of *Call of Duty: Warzone* discussing the First Lady of France, Brigitte Macron.

In fact, how this hyper-masculine gaming technoculture shapes the ways in which viewers engage with politics can be seen above in *Figure 28*. In a rare case of the topic of conversation referring to politics, the streamer and viewers discussed the marriage of Emmanuel Macron, the (as of writing) French President, to his significantly older ex-teacher Brigitte Macron. However, instead of this being a serious discussion, it was one that reflected the misogynistic elements of the hyper-masculine technoculture of Battle Royale Twitch streams with Brigitte Macron considered as a sexual object by many viewers - for example being called a bimbo. Not only then does this indicate how these stream assemblages can shape viewers' engagements

with politics, but also how politics can work as a source of humour for viewers, demonstrating how Twitch as a social platform for structures communication, knowledge and action and is a nexus for intensifying 'global' media flows that saturate everyday life (Adams 2015; Saunders 2012). This argument will be explored in greater depth in the next chapter. Pertinently here, this 'political discussion' illustrates how humour and toxicity are not always antagonistic but instead can work in parallel and/or be mutually constitutive of each other, making up part of the affective register within these emergent ludic assemblages. Yet, whether this misogynistic joking is seen as funny or toxic is dependent on the dispositions of the human participants within the stream assemblage, who again largely subscribe to the discourses of the hyper-masculine, gaming technoculture and therefore work to re-inscribe social differences within these assemblages (Dittmer 2013b). As I come to next, this acceptance of certain behaviours and the disapproval of others is instructive of hegemonic discourses of domination (Payne 2010) within these assemblages of ludic war.

7.3.1 Discourses of Domination

As outlined in more detail in Chapter 5, Payne (2010) discusses how ludic war within this hyper-masculine gaming technoculture leads to the reproduction of a hegemonic discourse that privileges domination to egalitarianism. To elucidate, as Payne writes, playing video games teaches players how to perform as players, as well as how to police and mark others when they deviate from presumed norms. Nonetheless, as I argue here, this also extends to the streaming of ludic war. This policing takes many forms, with different responses to infractions of gaming etiquette and more general social violations. These transgressions can be placed into three categories; playful, tolerant and inviolable. Many of these transgressions between streamers and team-mates are of a playful nature where gamers humorously irritate or provoke one another in virtual and real-world exchanges. These verbal and ludic sparring matches are understood to be joking by all parties, being part of the experience of playing against one another more generally. There are tolerant transgressions, the acceptance of off-colour conversations and banter that are usually not heard or allowed in public spaces - which I reason can also be considered as toxic behaviours. Finally, there are the inviolable transgressions, the practices that are a direct affront to the in-group, such as the use of incorrect weapons and equipment, or impinge on well-established rules of gaming - namely cheating – which I also recognise here as toxic behaviours.



Figure 29: Screenshot of a Twitch stream of *Call of Duty: Warzone* wherein the streamer and his team-mate are in a ludic sparring match.

An example of a playful transgression can be seen above in *Figure 29*, where the streamer is engaging in a ludic sparring match with a team-mate. Here he shoots at them with a shotgun (which causes no damage as friendly fire is disabled) before making the offensive gesture of giving them the finger and then zooming at each other's heads with the sniper scope on their weapons. In Twitch streams of Battle Royale videogames, there are frequent instances of other playful transgressions like trash-talking intermixed with episodes of homosocial humour, forms of ludic collaboration such as the sharing of tactics and casual 'everyday' conversation between team-mates. This is emblematic of the masculine bonding practices enabled by Battle Royale videogames like *Call of Duty: Warzone* (Bos 2018a), but through live-streaming it is remediated and extended towards a wider audience who through the para-social bonds co-produced between themselves and the streamer also feel able to participate in such conversations. In other words, both streamers and spectators alike can be seen as practicing these discourses of domination in these highly territorialised ludic assemblages. Additionally, these playful transgressions underscore the ambiguity of both violence and play and also the relations between these phenomena, in terms of the affects they produce, as well as how they allow for the emergence and coherence of these complex, ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and streams.

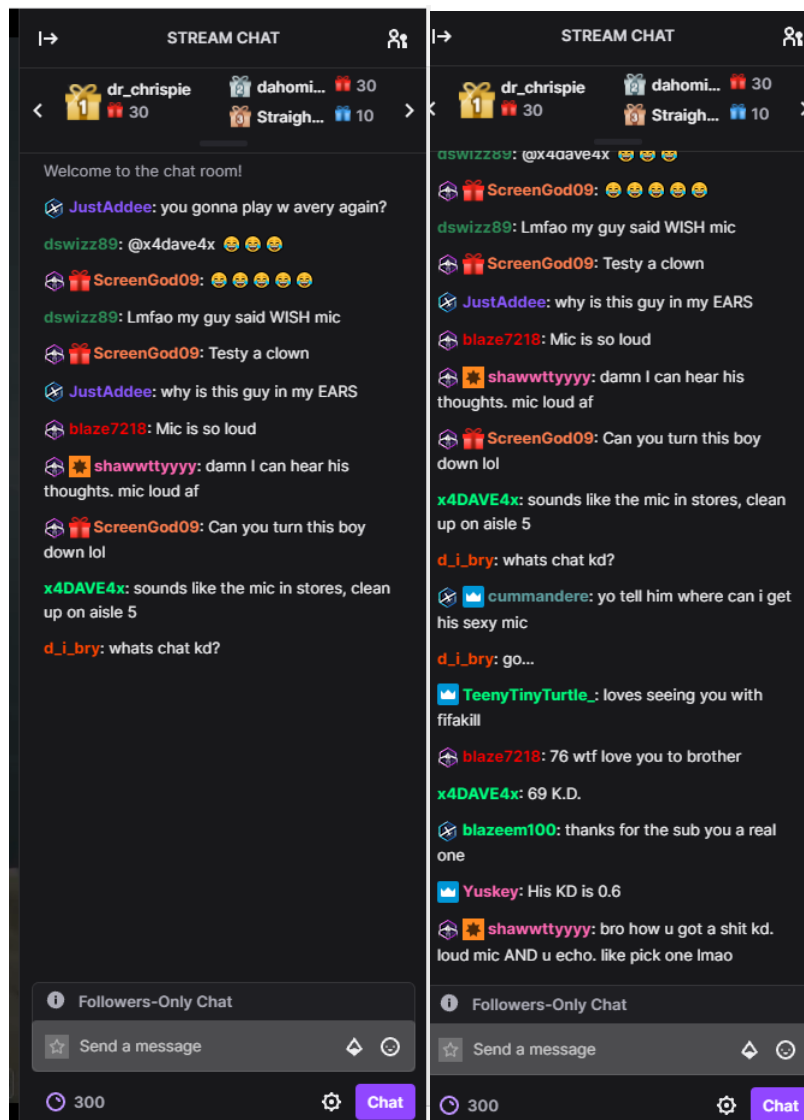
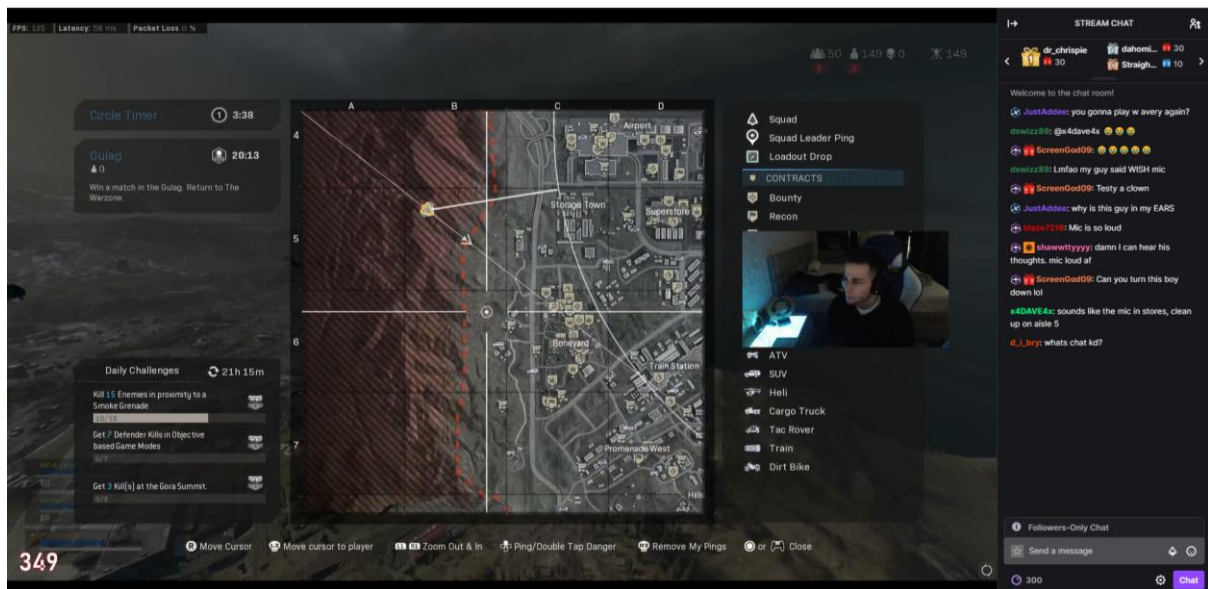


Figure 30: Screenshots showing a Twitch streamer and his viewers mocking his team-mate for his faulty microphone.

Another example of these discourses of domination is shown above in *Figure 30*, where the streamer, team-mates and viewers talk about another team-mate's microphone, here half joking and half insulting it for being too loud and of a poor quality. Specifically, here it is described as a Wish microphone - the online e-commerce platform that is known to list poor-quality or counterfeit goods - which viewers find humorous. These kinds of jokes and memes about disreputable companies like Wish, Temu and Shein are common across digital spaces, thus supporting the argument that popular culture works as a wider intertextual assemblage from which people can make humorous references to in friendly conversation. Jumping in on this conversation another viewer then derisively compares the team-mate's microphone to a shop tannoy. Therefore, this episode is instructive of the ways in which non-human actants can become co-constitutive of a distinctive stream humour, specifically here of a more hostile, snarky nature (Johnson 2022). Furthermore, it also reflects discourses of techno-fetishism, in which those with the correct equipment are viewed more positively within the gaming scene (Payne 2010), as well as that of techno-masculinity which associates men with advanced computer proficiency, which is in turn instructive of a hegemonic, militarised masculinity (Johnson 2018). Subsequently, the use of this poor quality microphone can be considered as a social transgression, an affront to the group, for both its negative, auditory affects and in failing to uphold notions of techno-masculinity, thus meaning it is met with this scathing mocking from other human participants within the stream assemblage. This example then in showing what those from the outside the gaming scene - or at least outside this group - may perhaps consider a form of cyber-bullying, highlights again how humour and toxicity can intersect and amplify each other as they co-constitute these emergent ludic assemblages. This sub-section then has illuminated how discourses of domination within this hyper-masculine gaming technoculture facilitate the coding of the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and streams. Notably, as I attend to in the subsequent sub-section, these practices and discourses of domination can also be seen in the ways in which streamers work against deviant practices of antagonistic players.

7.3.2 Hacking, Cheating and Griefing

In this sub-section, I explore how hackers, cheaters and 'griefers'⁶ emerge through and transform the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and streams, and the ways in which their behaviours are policed by streamers. To clarify, these deviant practices of hacking, griefing and cheating should be understood as higher-degree inviolable transgressions, due to how they result in more intense, negative affects within Battle Royale videogames and streams. In other words, hackers, cheaters and griefers through producing affects of toxicity, work to destabilise and deterritorialise these ludic assemblages. Significantly though, as Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009) argue, these disruptive, antagonistic practices derive from the same hyper-masculine, technoculture of the gaming community, in being another way to play these games. To be exact, these behaviours speak to notions of the multitude in producing new forms of subjectivity that energise but also exceed "Empire", as the same technological aptitude and cultural knowledge that stimulates the immaterial labour of the video game industry (including here streaming) is used subversively by hackers, cheaters, griefers and other deviant actors. Indeed, as I have outlined in Chapter 3, they can be understood as digital 'nomads' who subvert technology for deviant purposes, except here it is for ludic war and not 'real' war. In short, it is through these practices that cheaters, hackers and griefers transform videogames and intervene in the sensory and political economies of the technologies that enable the privatisation of play (Boluk and LeMieux 2017) - here specifically the immaterial playbour of streamers. As such, I now consider how these digital nomads, who in threatening streamers' affective labour and thus the emergence of these ludic assemblages, become demarcated as 'ludic terrorists'.

One of the most common forms of these deviant practices, specifically hackers, is the use of 'game bots' - a type of Artificial Intelligence (AI)-based expert system software that plays a videogame in place of a person - to advance through the game and build an in-game character that can be sold to another human for 'real-life' money. Like many other toxic behaviours or inviolable transgressions, this has been policed by streamers in both formal and informal ways,

⁶ Griefers, also referred to as trolls, are a common nuisance in online gaming communities, for using aspects of the game in unintended ways, for the sole purpose of annoying other players and not to gain a strategic advantage- i.e. cheating

as they look to negotiate these ‘threats’ to their stream and thus avoid the destabilising affects such deviant practices have on their immaterial playbour.

The image displays two screenshots of a Twitch stream by the user TeePee, who is playing Call of Duty: Warzone. The stream is titled "WZ w/ EnVy TeeP | Code TEEP in COD Store #CODpartner | !cod | !anticheat | !guns | !samsung | !monster | TylerTeeP on socials". The stream has 7,747 followers and 2,017 subscribers.

Top Screenshot: The main video shows a third-person view of the player's character in a city environment. The player's health is 14,051. The stream chat on the right shows various messages from viewers, including "VILL3RO: 2 months baby", "KevvSkillz: Prime RESUB!! VILL3RO welcome back to the Tyfights! for 2 months in a row!", "femmelame: JUHROMEEEE", "kattawarrior: Hey teepee if given the chance to come out of retirement would you still play pro cod?", "KingLionV: I remember how I got Damascus before level 11", "awinter87: bought the full hacks with unlocks on all weapons. SICK", "a_zura_: LMFAO what is this loadout", "T_Money_Jones: ahticheatz Comig", "Mr_QP: Should have warned you", "gothamsp: Imagine cheating and still being bad KEKW", "the_fuzzy: level 10 with Damascus Imao", "transcend_sp: then the hackers were replying to the tweet with clips of them hacking after the ban wave like 'I didn't get banned!'", "Reekin_Havoc: JESUS!! No wonder this game is dying. Could it be so obvious.", "Send a message", "Chat".

Bottom Screenshot: The main video shows a first-person view of the player's character, looking through a scope. The player's health is 14,051. The stream chat on the right shows various messages from viewers, including "SolidOwntz: 20,000", "PI_: 10,000", "hrdht...: 5,400", "maverickj: TeeP what do you think of all Twitter hype surrounding this 'anti-cheat' they are working on?", "kingdeuce23: this game I tell ya", "thiefbaby_: *beast", "kentb57: shots are not even close", "tempf: love that this guy has damascus everything", "gum711: 7#0THC", "ony92: Silly question but how do they get everything leveled up so fast only being level 10? And Damascus?", "theynkzedone: @YoGoySandwich some people like winning more than actually playing I guess", "PlayfulTitan420: This guy is obviously amazing", "CharlieHorse88: he's cheating so bad", "Thenightwolf: time for apex", "Replying to @colashaw13: wheres Wjcz whe...", "potluck300: I wish all the streamers had one lot", "doommeister6857: wow", "PlayfulTitan420: I think he should retire", "Send a message", "Chat".

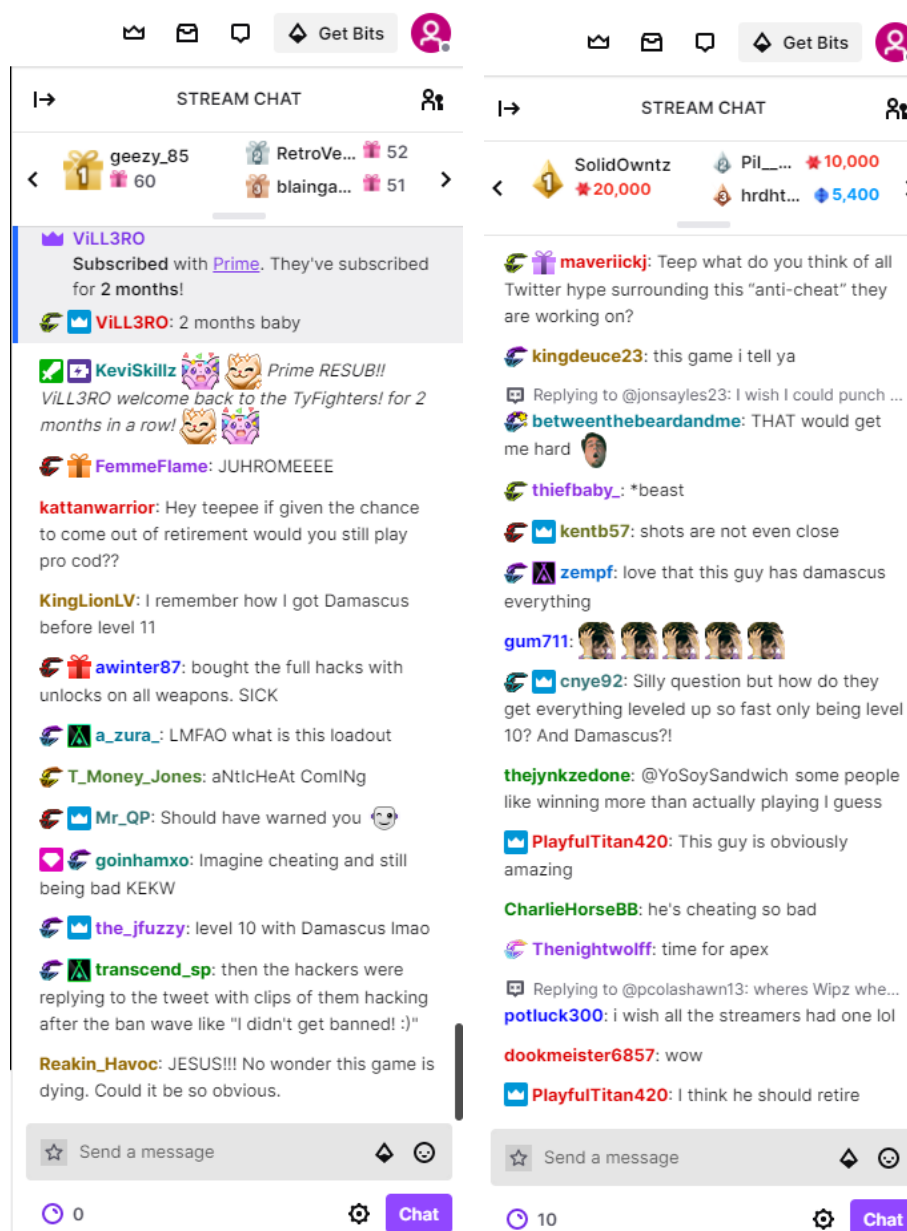


Figure 31: Screenshots from a Twitch stream of *Call of Duty: Warzone* showing the streamer checking an enemy player is a hacker, with this also being a topic of conversation in the chat window among viewers.

This includes the use of the in-game reporting system, although as shown in *Figure 31*, since streaming creates a video record of their gameplay, streamers are able to re-watch these videos as well as use the in-game feature to spectate the enemy player that killed them, to check if they were cheating and then can send a report. In this case, both viewers and streamers recognised that this was the behaviour of a ‘game bot’. In this way, both the stream and the game itself enable the streamer to conduct practices of surveillance to monitor against cheaters, griefers and hackers, and so manage against threats to these ludic assemblages.

Thus, I argue that cheaters, hackers and griefers can be seen as ludic terrorists, who in being policed by the streamers result in these ludic assemblages also emerging as a form of 'surveillant assemblage' and the subsequent reproduction of discourses of banal terrorism (Katz 2007).



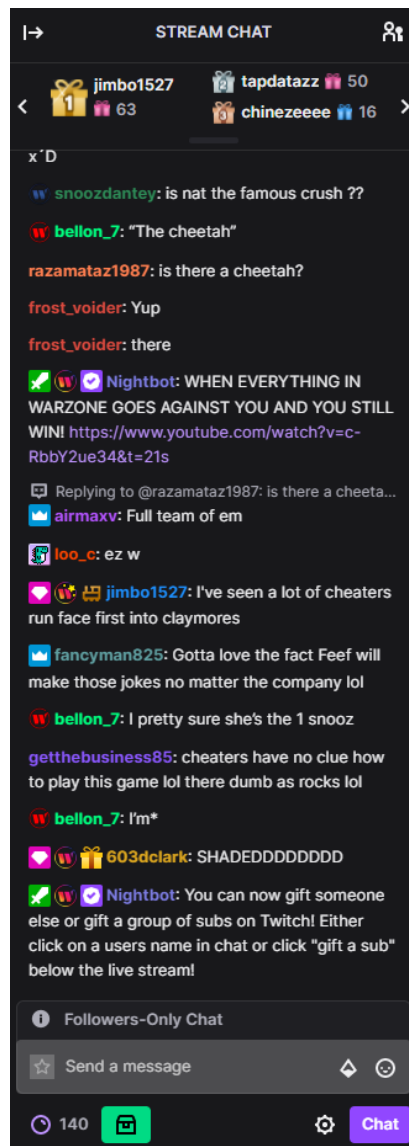


Figure 32: Screenshots of a Twitch stream of *Call of Duty: Warzone*, showing the streamer talking to the chat about, and using, certain in-game equipment to stop ‘bots’.

Streamers have also developed more informal ways of managing against the various practices of deviant actors by relying on their game knowledge and experience, like as shown above in *Figure 32*. In this example, both the streamer and his viewers are discussing how game ‘bots’ are coded incorrectly to play against claymores - an in-game piece of equipment which like its ‘real-life’ counterpart is a directional anti-personnel mine that can be either fired remotely by the player or activated by an enemy passing through its booby-trap tripwire. In effect then, the streamer here is meta-gaming against other meta-gamers within these complex ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames (Boluk and LiMieux 2017). In doing so, this exemplifies how the multitude oscillates between subversion and submission to “Empire”

through ludic assemblage, as streamers use the technological aptitude and cultural knowledge they have developed through play against the hackers who use this same expertise to produce these ‘bots’ (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009).

Lastly, further underscoring the complex power of the multitude, practices of cheating and grieving also extend beyond the game assemblage in directly influencing the emergent stream assemblage. This is most commonly done through the practice of ‘stream-sniping’ where other players can watch the streamer’s live broadcast to then join the same game and either gain an advantage against or purposefully annoy the streamer. A digitally-mediated form of ‘screen-peaking’, this deviant practice can thus be identified as an inviolable transgression within the gaming scene.

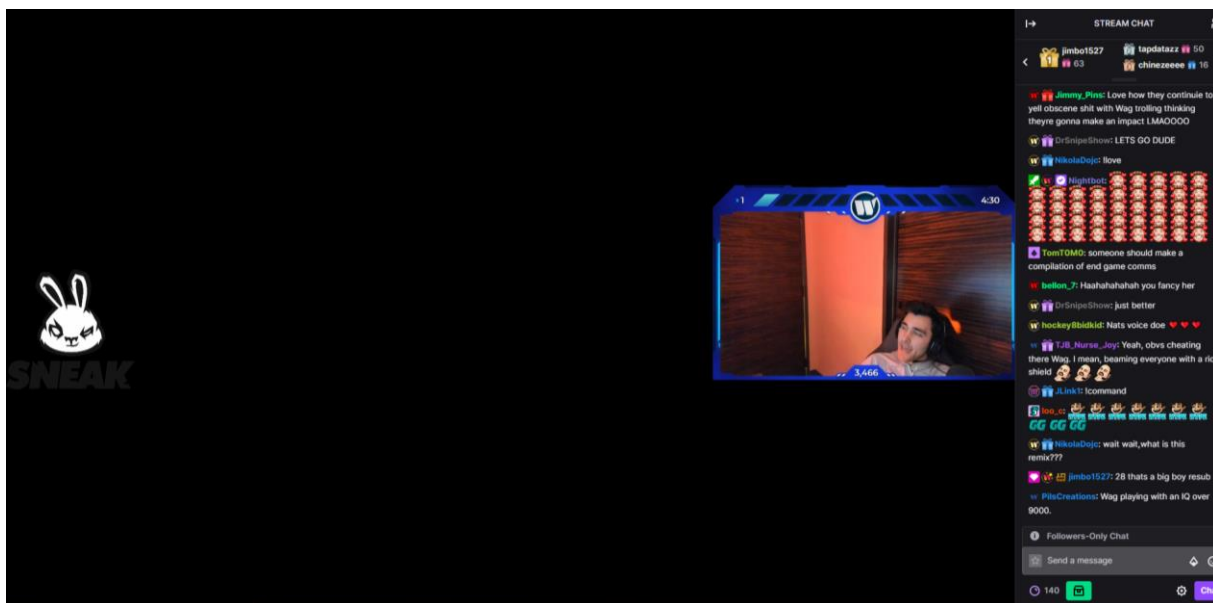


Figure 33: Screenshot showing the streamer hiding new game details.

As shown above in *Figure 33*, this in turn has led to the streamers using the tactic of hiding their stream when loading a new game to hide the details that cheaters and griefers would need to join that same game, thus protecting them against stream-sniping and the resultant, destabilising affects this produces. This example again demonstrates the technical expertise of the streamer in managing threats to their stream. Subsequently, this section shows how the

same geopolitical logics used in surveillance and anti-terrorism discourses are reproduced in these ludic assemblages, as streamers employ security measures to protect their stream or territory against these ludic terrorists. In doing so, it also echoes how war works as a perpetual social condition (Hardt and Negri 2000, 2004). In particular, it exemplifies how war has become embedded into the culture of everyday life, where in the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and streams “the enemy” i.e. the cheater, griefer or hacker, is represented as “an absolute threat to the ethical order” and is thus “reduced to an object of routine police repression” by streamers and viewers alike (Hardt and Negri 2000: 13). As such, I add to our understanding of how “Empire” is increasingly being animated through these emerging, digital spaces, through considering livestreaming as not just a new form of immaterial playbour, but also a biopolitical technology of imperial control. Nonetheless, as I come to next, it should also be recognised how these practices are in turn productive of a complex nexus of affects, hinting further at the multitudinous potential of these ludic assemblages to both empower and destabilise “Empire”.

7.3.3 Humour, Toxicity and the Multitude

So far, I have discussed how deviant practices of cheating, grieving and hacking are instructive of the multitude and are in turn policed by streamers. Yet, it is also imperative to explore how the toxic affects produced through such practices can be further manipulated by the streamer and help facilitate their affective labour – in particular in the production of humour. A common example of this is in how streamers often made jokes about being ‘tilted’, a gaming term used to articulate the deterioration of gaming performance and feelings of irritation and anger that result through the toxic or deviant behaviours of other players, and jesting/gesturing that they would be toxic in turn. As such, this example reveals the (potentially) cyclical and reproductive qualities of toxicity in its affects (Gandolfi and Ferdig 2022). Nonetheless, as I outline here, it shows the agency of streamers to work on the immanent power or puissance of these ludic assemblages to reproduce *pouvoir* i.e. the actualised power of these ludic assemblages, and thus further territorialise this corporeal ensemble of relations – pertinently the social relations between themselves and viewers – involved in stream assemblages (Dittmer 2017).

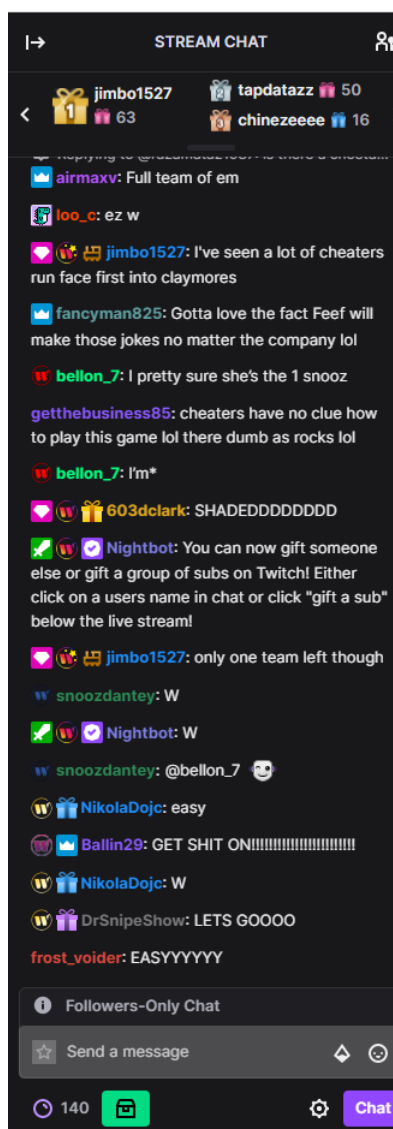
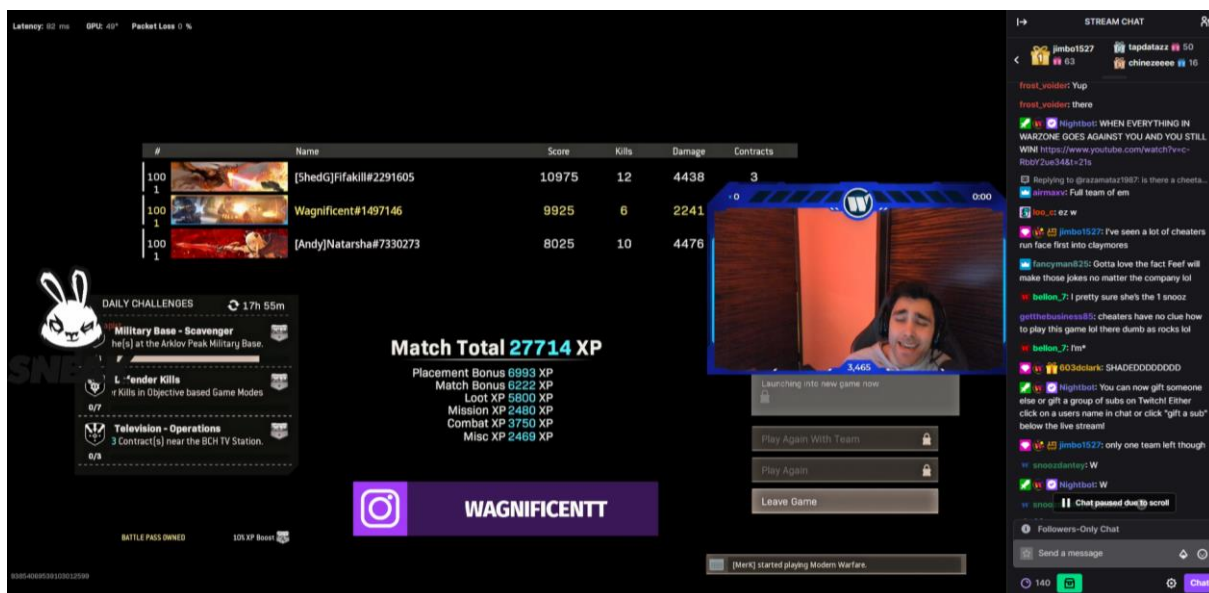
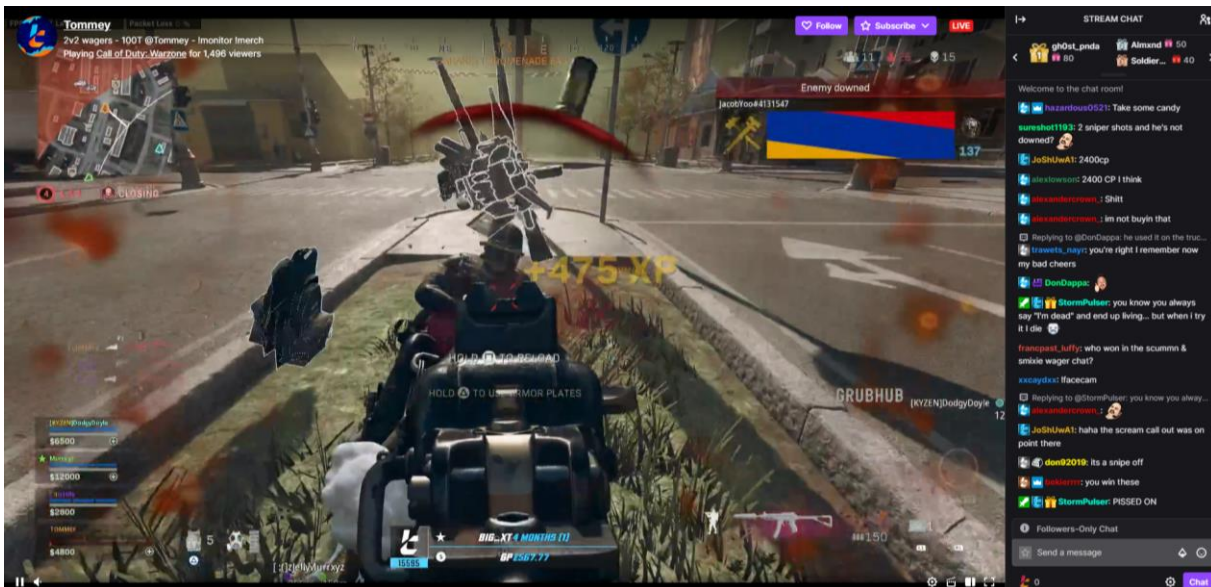


Figure 34: Screenshots showing the streamer mocking these cheaters, and being congratulated by viewers in the chat window for winning this match of *Call of Duty: Warzone*.

However, a more intense instance of how streamers use toxic affects to their advantage is illustrated in both *Figure 33* and *Figure 34* (shown above), where the streamer is talking to and jeeringly agitating the cheaters that they had killed at the end of the game through the in-game communication feature. The chat are also congratulatory of the streamer and his team-mates, being especially entertained by the fact that they defeated cheaters, since cheating is considered an inviolable transgression in the gaming scene. Specifically, this further supports the production of parasocial bonds between streamers and their audience, due to feelings of empathy that viewers have experienced in their own gameplay that has been ruined by cheaters, which therefore creates a more coherent, territorialised assemblage. Subsequently, this sense of solidarity can be understood as a bodily reaction stemming from viewers' prior experiences of videogaming, again showing how the body acts as both a somatic archive and site of affective interaction (Caso 2018; Dittmer 2015a), one that I contend also extends to the second-bodies politic of the stream sub-community. Moreover, defeating these 'ludic terrorists' helps the streamer to reassert their masculinity, not just in terms of demonstrating their technical prowess, but also in embodying the symbol of the heroic soldier as is typical of militaristic narratives of the first-player campaigns in games like those in the *Call of Duty* franchise (Blackburn 2018). Additionally, in further remediating the 'War on Terror' into ludic form, the streamer carries out viewers' 'revenge fantasies' against these 'ludic terrorists' giving both them and the viewers a form of catharsis (Huntemann 2010). Altogether, these processes demonstrate the multitudinous potential of these ludic assemblages in showing how affects of anger, toxicity and solidarity, can resonate in ways that further support the hegemonic logics of "Empire".

Equally, the toxic affects generated by cheaters, griefers and hackers can be amplified by the streamer who in policing against these inviolable transgressions enact discourses of domination. Here it is useful then to consider how these 'nomads' or 'ludic terrorists' are demarcated as others, most commonly in becoming the target of offensive and at times derogatory language from both the streamer and viewers. This is indicative of how cheaters, griefers and hackers become socially differentiated (i.e. sexualised, racialised etc.) through assemblage, with loose summaries 'stuck' to the digital, corporeal bodies of these ludic terrorists (Saldanha 2010). This attests to how livestreaming as a biopolitical technology works

as a disseminating and differentiating mechanism in administrating subjects of “Empire” (Hardt and Negri 2000).



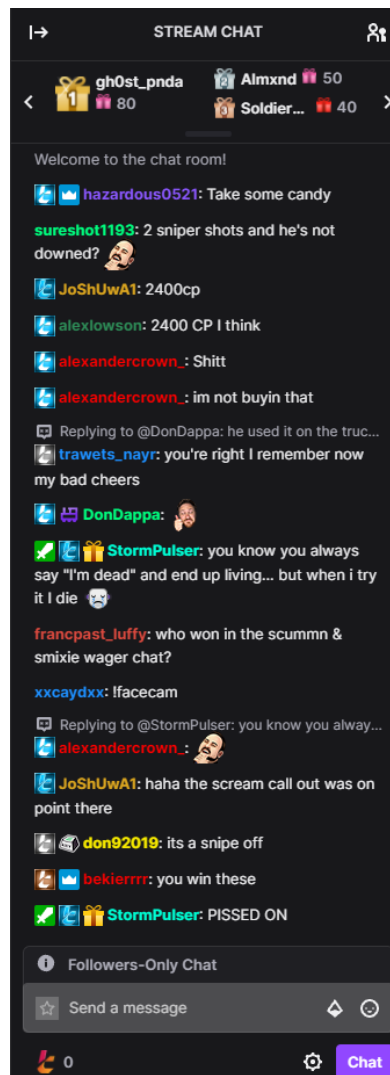


Figure 35: Screenshot of a Twitch stream of *Call of Duty: Warzone*, showing the streamer humiliating an opponent, and the reaction of viewers in the chat window.

A common and vivid example of this ‘Othering’, can be seen above in *Figure 35*, where the streamer knocks down, ‘tea-bags’⁷ and then kills the cheating enemy player. An act of homoeroticism and digitalised sexual aggression, humiliating cheaters in this way reaffirms power relations between the strong ‘masculine’ highly-skilled streamer/player, and the weak, feminised cheater, in effect dehumanising and effeminising the perceived ‘enemy’ Other (Zhu 2018). I argue then that toxic behaviours like the use of derogatory language and ‘tea-bagging’ can be considered as enactments of symbolic violence. To clarify, through their high levels of

⁷ Teabagging, also known as corpse-humping, is an internet slang term referring to the practice of squatting repeatedly over a dead player’s character, to imitate the sexual act in which a man places his scrotum into the mouth of a sexual partner, as a way to humiliate and/or provoke the other player.

cultural (embodied through videogaming/streaming and in the objectified form through gaming/streaming equipment) and social capital (number of viewers/followers) streamers gain symbolic power (Bourdieu 1987; Bourdieu and Wacqaunt 1992) and in enacting these banal, toxic practices thereby reinforce discourses and hierarchies (Schubert 2013). It then also stresses the agency of streamers in both negotiating and amplifying these affects of toxicity of their play to benefit their immaterial playbour. Specifically, here the streamer can successfully work on the puissance of these ludic assemblages to reproduce pouvoir of these ludic assemblages in reinforcing this tangible ensemble of relations, pertinently the social relations between themselves and viewers (Dittmer 2017). Additionally, it should also be highlighted that practices like ‘tea-bagging’ are also productive of a vulgar, bodily form of superiority humour in terms of how it generates laughter from the audience, with one viewer in this instance exclaiming “Pissed on”. Therefore, this incident demonstrates how viewers also work to reproduce these discourses of domination as well as how these structures are internalised by subjects and hence rendered normal - or indeed funny - through banal practices like play (Schubert 2013).

Significantly, this episode again underscores how humour and toxicity are not opposite sides of a binary, but instead can be mutually constitutive of each other, existing as part of the same affective register within the emergent ludic assemblages of the hyper-masculine, gaming technoculture. In particular, it illustrates Johnson’s (2022) point that the humour surrounding games often takes a derisive and/or belligerent bent in contrast to the idealistic forms of humour associated with less structured ‘play’. Thus, instances like the ‘tea-bagging’ of cheaters exemplify why humour should not be romanticised and instead be taken seriously (Horton 2018; Woodyer 2018), as despite its transformative potential, equally, it may also work to reproduce hegemonic discourses of domination (Payne 2010) while in turn simultaneously unveiling the tense relations between heteronormativity, masculinity, and gaming (Taylor and Chess 2018). In other words, humour as produced through videogames and streams, in its multitudinous potential both subvert and submit to “Empire” (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009; Hardt and Negri 2000, 2004). Having now discussed how toxicity, as characterised by certain behaviours, attitudes and practices, emerges through the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale Twitch streams, the final sub-section focuses on how young gamers have negotiated, encountered and engaged with toxic behaviours and practices in the gaming scene.

7.3.4 Toxicity in the Gaming Scene

Ben: *They, they are very racist, I can tell you that. And like I've probably used the N-word a couple of times, but not as like a racist thing, it's just a word that comes out. Um, for the most part they are fine, but they are very racist, they say lots of things that they probably don't mean, but they just say cos it's- just there, to use, um... But they are, they are friendly, they will help you out if you don't have a very good game they'll help you out or they'll normally like walk you through it, like follow me just try and get some kills. Um, you would get the occasion where they will call you a [f-word] or something, and like "Stop playing this game", if you can't play it and stuff. It's just kinda like 50/50 really, it depends who you're playing with. It can go both ways, you've just got to flip a coin and hope for the best.*

The frequent use of sexist, homophobic, racist and otherwise derogatory language, with slurs often being used as a form of trash-talking within gaming space was recognised by several young gamers. For instance, here Ben talks about how racism is frequent within the game and admits to using derogatory language such as the n-word himself. He says how it is a word "that just comes out" but also notes the way in which such slurs have been tolerated within the community as it is not directed to hurt people. Indeed in asserting how "it's- just there, to use" - a notion that many of the interviewees had also suggested - he demonstrates how such terms have been rendered meaningless in online gaming spaces as a tolerated transgression, speaking to his identity as the main demographic, i.e. young white males, playing these games (Payne 2010). This further exemplifies how through videogaming, loose sexualised, racialised summaries 'stick' to the digital, corporeal bodies of enemy players (Saldanha 2010), and thus reassert power relations between a good 'masculine' highly-skilled player and a weak 'Other' enemy player (Zhu 2018). Moreover, Ben points out that it is also contingent on who the human players are in these games, as while some may engage in toxic and discriminatory behaviours, such as by name-calling and abusing those who are playing poorly, others may act in a more supportive manner towards struggling team-mates in a form of ludic collaboration. This again then illustrates the ambiguous, indeterministic qualities of play in terms of its affects on human bodies, which are in turn mutually shaped by players' dispositions (Woodyer and Carter 2020).

Harry: *Yeah but, I think in my experience of um... [inaudible] I don't know let's say, like for example sometimes, sometimes you don't know who you are playing against. I don't think its [inaudible] They have no idea whether I'm a boy, girl, gay, straight [inaudible] I don't think that's their intention, I think they just sort of take something offensive and go with it.*

Crucially, as Harry usefully recognises, a great deal of this toxic behaviour is due to web anonymity, with individuals more willing to show disruptive attitudes characterised by misogynist and hostile drivers, engendering an atmosphere filled with toxic connotations ranging from homophobia to racism (Gandolfi and Ferdig 2022). Likewise, it should be recognised that these toxic behaviours may be a tactic to distract opponents and/or be the result of frustration from gameplay affects. Additionally, as Harry acknowledges, this language is not necessarily specifically targeted towards someone because their identity may be unknown by the offending player. This then echoes Ben's thoughts about how these words have been rendered meaningless, being ascribed to an imaginary "other" enemy player. This idea of this language being made meaningless exemplifies how toxic behaviour through videogaming can be considered a form of symbolic violence, as players internalise hierarchies of race, gender and sexuality and unconsciously naturalise such structures in their everyday lives playing these games (Schubert 2013).

Elliot: *-Um, it's a bit of both things for sure. Casual player, yeah for sure. Age thing, I think a lot of kids jump in these games and they kind of want to mature right away, they want to be, you know every kid has that. They wanna be with the big kids, they wanna, you know they wanna be cool and they wanna be mature, and I think that's what is they hear the- The adults, use this wording, and they don't care they're going to do whatever they can, and when the kids hear this they think "Wow I want to be like them", "I wanna play well like them", "I wanna speak like them". It's contagious, and it's that really bad nature in it sort of thing like that. So it's, it's something that's definitely passed on, easily- Um, and then, God forbid, all of a sudden you'll hear a group of adults and a group of 12 year olds screaming at one other and it's almost like, it's almost like these people live in the same house together. Why is this so natural? Ah it's just weird.*

Elliot also refers to the age of players in the production of toxic, ludic assemblages, with young players engaging in hyper-masculine practices of trash-talking as a way of fitting in the gaming community and proving that they can act like mature adults. These behaviours are instructive then of Gandolfi and Ferdig's (2022) argument that toxicity becomes a dynamic that players learn and apply as a well-engrained habit. In other words, such practices show how hegemonic discourses of domination are reproduced through participating in these ludic assemblages, where in imitating this 'idealised' militarised masculinity these games young people can become 'toxic' subjects. This then further illustrates the enlivening power of popular culture in terms of how it shapes (young) people's political subjectivities, identities and engagements (Caso 2018; Dittmer 2015a) but also again why would scholars should recognise the various forms that play can take including its 'dark sides' (Woodyer 2018). In particular, although play has been touted for its critical possibility for transforming geopolitics in progressive ways (Dittmer 2015b), here I argue that there should be a consideration of how toxic play in Battle Royale games like *Call of Duty: Warzone* can reinforce hegemonic geopolitical discourse. Indeed, it exemplifies how as Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2021) elucidate, digital play is increasingly integral to "Empire"'s victory and defeat. Specifically, the enactment of these discourses of domination accelerates the suffusion of these militarised sensibilities deeper into everyday life, while also stimulating the growth of the alt-right - a group who subscribe to many of the same hyper-masculine values – in these digital spaces.

Interviewer: *Yeah. Do you think there's much that other gamers and other players could do about [discrimination]?*

Wes: *Yeah, yeah. I guess that, probably has got more of an impact on them as a company themselves, in terms of you know people- realistically like, if I thought of a game where everyone was cheating I just would not play because it'd be rubbish. But like if everyone was being, you know racist, or sexist I could realistically just mute people and play on. Like it wouldn't realistically affect my experience personally. Um, especially if I just turn like voice chat off or you know- with Overwatch like you can just not be in chat, you know, typing or voice so you know, if you just never went into them it wouldn't affect you at all.*

Interviewer: *Yeah definitely. Do you think it tends to be more stuff like cheating and that, that tends to be taken a lot more seriously in these games?*

Wes: *Um, I think probably people could be definitely more proactive in like reporting people and whatever. But then again, the onus is just on the kind of companies that do host the games. So like I said, I wouldn't expect them to be that efficient or effective with kind of, you know, banning people, you know, suspending them for kind of any comments they make- I don't know, maybe they are, but it doesn't seem like it to me.*

Finally, Wes, like several young gamers, points out that cheating would make him stop playing a game, whereas the ability to mute other players to not hear derogatory language means he can still enjoy an unaffected gaming experience. Indeed, it is important to highlight here how technical fixes, like in this case the mute option, but also report systems and anti-cheat software are functions put in place by game developers to reduce toxic behaviours. However, as this section has shown such behaviours still occur as both normal and deviant players negotiate such systems and each other, illustrating the puissance or excess power of these assemblages in constantly producing a number of affects (Dittmer 2017). Yet, these transgressions still occur, again illustrating how toxic behaviours such as discrimination are mainly tolerated within gaming spaces, whereas actions like cheating are considered as inviolable transgressions as they tend to destabilise, unsettle or even deterritorialise the ludic assemblage through the production of antagonistic, disruptive affects by making players like Wes stop playing (Payne 2010). Likewise, as Wes himself points out, it reflects how the gaming industry would only work to properly fix these issues with discrimination if they fully disrupted the production of a retention economy (Shaw and Warf 2009) - hinting at the notion that such discourses of domination are reproduced by gaming developers. Here it should be noted that video game workers, through their early socialisation into computer proficiency, current working practices and life-long passion for gaming are co-constitutive of a predominant, techno-masculinity which is in turn sub-ordinated to recreating an 'idealised' militarised masculinity (Johnson 2018). Indeed, technical fixes like the mute option – where derogatory language is still spoken but not heard - point to notions of technological rationality, i.e. the forms of reason that are embedded within technological design and practices, which are in turn structured by hegemonic, masculine and neo-liberal discourses (Salter 2018). Or in other words, the material aspects of technology are mutually reproductive of social relations and

hierarchies, resulting in the emergence of a symbolically masculine gaming space and perpetuation of symbolic violence. Nonetheless, this promotion of discourses of domination and a hyper-masculine, techno-masculinity in producing this retention economy, comes into conflict with a diversifying player base and the rise of progressivism in the gaming industry – a development I discuss further in the next chapter. Indeed, it is indicative of the persistent contradictions of digital play highlighted by Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2020), as by intensifying the accumulation of global capital, the gaming industry sharpens social divisions within the gaming scene and beyond.

Thus, to summarise this gaming technoculture which is instructive of the multitude and “Empire” (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009) then can be understood as highly territorialised assemblage or civic, long-term second-bodies politic that is continually co-produced through the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and streams, and its affects of humour and toxicity (among others). This in turn results in a multiplicity of subjectivities, be that of the hyper-masculine, “hard-core” gamer or the nomadic ‘ludic terrorist’ which work to animate and/or destabilise “Empire”. However, it is also important to attend to how the construction of such subjectivities as shaped by their encounters with (Battle Royale) videogames influences young peoples’ broader engagements with geopolitics. Indeed, as I turn to in the following chapter, young gamers do not necessarily fully embody these subjectivities, with there being many complexities, ambiguities and ambivalences as to how they engage with politics in their everyday lives.

7.4 Concluding Remarks

This chapter has focused on the young gamers, streamers and viewers of Battle Royale videogames and broadcasts and in particular, the humourous and toxic dimensions of these emergent assemblages, to illuminate how various gaming-related practices like ‘trash-talking’ and cheating are instructive of a hyper-masculine, militarised gaming technoculture, which is in turn co-constitutive of “Empire”. After initially reviewing the geographical scholarship on humour and laughter, this chapter through a number of examples, has charted the distinct humour that emerges through streaming and emphasised its importance to the affective labour of streamers. However, in considering both ambiguous notions of toxicity and the ways

in which social transgressions in ludic war are regulated through discourses of domination, this chapter has turned to how the same assemblages are productive of, and transformed by, affects of toxicity. This centred on how streamers reinforced hegemonic discourses and logics of “Empire”, as they policed against cheaters, griefers and hackers, demarcating these deviant actors as ludic terrorists. In doing so, this chapter emphasised the ways in which affects of toxicity and humour resonate, counteract and intertwine with each other throughout the event of the stream, such as in enactments of symbolic violence, thus exemplifying how both affects make possible these homosocial, militaristic assemblages. It is clear then that young gamers through everyday practices of playing, streaming and spectating *Call of Duty: Warzone* and other Battle Royale games and streams largely reproduce hegemonic geopolitical discourse. Nevertheless, as I come to in Chapter 8, the political subjectivities of young gamers are in fact much more complex, and as I discuss in Chapter 9 there is a need to engage with the ‘real’, social effects of these processes on young people’s lives and further explore ambiguous notions of violence.

Chapter 8: Young Gamers, Politics and Ludic Assemblage

This chapter examines young gamers' interpretations of, engagements with and participation in politics in relation to videogaming and their everyday lives. To begin with, this chapter overviews how young people have been conceptualised as (geo)political agents within critical geopolitics and political geographical scholarship, arguing for a need to further consider how their agencies, subjectivities and dispositions are shaped through their interactions with videogames and a wider assemblage of popular culture. Secondly, I extend on the empirical work of scholars focusing on audiences interpretations' of military-themed videogames (e.g. Huntemann 2010, Payne 2010; Robinson 2013). Here in attending to how young gamers engage with the hegemonic geopolitical imaginaries and military representations in Battle Royale videogames like *Call of Duty: Warzone* (e.g. Bos 2018a; Power 2007; Smicker 2010) I consider how their views are also shaped by other social factors. Thirdly, I explore the degree to which young people participate in the formal/public sphere of 'macro-politics' or 'big P' politics in their everyday lives, and how this has been affected by their interactions with popular culture and social media. Fourthly, I examine how young people engage with the informal/private sphere of 'micro-politics' or 'small p' politics through practices of videogaming, in relation to how the dissemination of progressive politics in the gaming industry and a growing, diverse player base has been opposed by reactionary, misogynistic and racist elements of gaming culture (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2020). Lastly, this chapter further explores how Twitch streams of Battle Royale videogames work both as forms of ludocapitalism and militainment, in addition to the broader political dimensions of Twitch as a form of social media. In particular, this section turns to how these streams are constructed as 'apolitical' spaces detached from everyday life even though their playbour and the emergence of these ludic assemblages are shaped by the processes of geopolitics, militarisation and neo-liberalism that characterise "Empire". In doing so, this chapter will further elucidate how young gamers as first-bodies politic or assemblages in and of themselves, are entangled in a mix of social relations and assemblages of popular culture, which in turns affects the ways in which they think about, engage with and participate in P/politics.

8.1 Young Gamers and Politics

As discussed in Chapter 4, following Philo and Smith's (2003) call for more attention to be paid to the connections and transitions between big 'P' 'Politics' / small 'p' 'politics', there has been greater attention paid to the (P/political) geographies, discourses and practices of children's and young people's citizenship, participation, rights and agency and their (marginal) political status (e.g. Bosco 2010; Crawley 2010; Mills 2013; see Skelton 2013). Specifically, as Kallio and Häkli, (2013) write such scholarship follows three inter-linked threads; a) it considers children and young people's active roles in P/politics; b) it explores how their identities and subjectivities are shaped through the political worlds of peer groups, families, formal institutions, local communities and the wider society in which they are embedded; and c) it engages with how they negotiate changing geo-economic and socio-cultural conditions in their everyday lives. For instance, Bosco (2010) explores the political agency of children from Latino immigrant families along the US/Mexico as they assist in women's community advocacy work through everyday practices of play and work. While Mills (2013) has explored the ways in which the Scout Movement in Britain, casts young people as both future, governable or 'good' citizen subjects and simultaneously gives them a distinct set of responsibilities as 'active citizens' whilst Scouts. This notion of the 'good' citizen subject is particularly important in thinking about how children and young people have also been the subjects of 'moral panics' - an argument that I explore further in Chapter 9. Likewise, Wood (2012) has examined the everyday practices of young people from New Zealand, considering how they occupy an in-between or liminal status as political beings/becomings in the hybrid, political space of the school, while offering political, critical and tactical responses to social issues such as bullying, racism, water conservation and obesity that were different to adults' Politics. Altogether then, this body of work has recognised young people as political actors, unpacking the complexities of their political subjectivities, agencies and actions across a variety of places and spaces. This chapter builds on these themes in exploring a) how young gamers engage with politics in videogames and Politics in their everyday lives; b) how their identities and subjectivities are in part shaped by their participation in the gaming scene; and c) how they have negotiated processes of globalisation, namely the transnationalisation of media (Saunders 2012), as well as progressiveness within the gaming scene.

Intersecting with this work in political geography, scholarship going under the label of critical geopolitics of children and young people has attended to the ways in which they can be included, excluded, disregarded, empowered and represented through national geopolitical processes, as well as how their agency is shaped by regional and global geopolitical processes (see Benwell and Hopkins 2016a). For instance, Benwell and Dodds (2011), through researching the views of young Argentinians on the Malvinas/Falklands dispute, explore how Argentine territorial nationalism is not received uniformly across the nation-state, with its reception instead shaped by factors such as geographical location, family history and generation. In work intersecting with emotional geopolitics, Pain et al. (2010) have explored the fears and hopes of a diverse range of young people living in New Zealand and the United Kingdom. In attending to how young people in various ways navigate these emotional landscapes, Pain et al. foreground how global and everyday fears are inseparable. In a similar vein, Hörschelmann (2008), has examined how young people in Leipzig, Germany were involved in the production, negotiation and contestation of global politics in their responses to the Iraq war. By investigating their interactions with media, friends, and parents at sites like the city and the home, Hörschelmann found that young people perceived themselves as being in proximity to the events in Iraq, while also exercising citizenship through participating in globally networked anti-war protests. Nevertheless, although this work has further foregrounded young people's agencies as well as expanded on what is thought of as 'geopolitical', I contend here that there is still little focus on popular culture and media in these analyses on children and young people within political geography and critical geopolitics. Additionally, I argue that more attention needs to be paid to complexities and contradictions of young people's political participation and related activism, agency, and practices, both in terms of their status as ambiguous political subjects and how they may engage in forms of politics, especially those that are digitally-mediated, as these are typically not identified as manifestations of civic engagement (see Staeheli 2018).

Indeed, I argue that there has been a paucity of work specifically engaging with how young people's political subjectivities, interactions and agencies are shaped by their engagements with popular culture and the Internet, even as more recent work turns towards the relational and 'more-than-human' figure of the post-child (see Aitken 2019). This is despite how processes of globalisation have enabled the trans-nationalisation of media and more broadly

have enabled the circulation of the intense global flows of information that increasingly affect young people and other citizens' everyday lives (Saunders 2012). This is especially significant in thinking about how young gamers can be understood as first-bodies politic (Protevi 2009) - assemblages that configure the construction of categories of social difference and are dependent on an assortment of material flows, like food, water and pertinently media. To be more exact, as elucidated in Chapter 4 I reason that young people should be recognised as multiple media users (Taylor 2018) interacting with a wider assemblage of popular culture in their everyday lives (Dittmer 2015a), which leads in part to the construction and materialisation of political subjectivities (Caso 2018). Subsequently, the following sections further attend to the complex and ambiguous ways in which young gamers have engaged with politics through the ludic assemblages enabled through videogaming and streaming, in addition to this wider assemblage of popular culture to show how young gamers engage with politics in their everyday lives.

8.2 Geopolitics, Militarism and Videogaming

Interviewer: *How do you think the military is represented in those games? Do you think much about it or not at all?*

Wes: *I'd say they've definitely, definitely made out to be a, much cooler thing than I'd probably think it actually is like it, You know, of course, like in especially, games like Call of Duty in single player you're going on these cool missions and, like all these cool characters and these heroes that are made out to be like badass and whatever. But, in reality it's definitely- that's definitely not the case.*

Interviewer: *Yeah and I guess more broadly, do you think there's political messages in these games? Or not?*

Wes: *Um, I don't know. I mean I couldn't really think of any... off the top of my head. Um, but it definitely like does like I guess the, one thing that you do see, especially in like Call of Duty is the kind of countries in which the bad guys are always from or you know, the issues tend to kind of you know, slightly reflect the kind of issues in society -*

well not society - but you know, kind of world issues, um. But I don't know I don't know if they kind of push any agenda at all. I've never really thought about it that way.

As found through interviews with young gamers, like Wes above, most of them passively engaged with the representations and discourses within these games. This in spite of how, as various scholars have argued, military-themed videogames support hegemonic geopolitical imaginations and sensibilities. Indeed, like Bos (2018a), I found that a majority of players only temporarily and passively engaged with the single-campaign mode in *Call of Duty*, and instead preferred playing multiplayer modes and being able to compete against others. For instance, Wes enjoys, but is also aware of the heroic nature of characters in the *Call of Duty* series, and the way in which war is represented as a form of spectacle (Stahl 2010). Yet, when asked about whether these games contained any geopolitical messages, he struggled to think of any, except for acknowledging that they reproduce hegemonic geographical imaginaries on who are “the bad guys”. This notion of “the bad guys” implicitly refers to the likes of Russia and Islamist terrorists who are frequently the antagonists in the series, which I argue is also suggestive of a recognition the simplistic, binary framings of world politics found within the mainstream media. This shows that while young people like Wes do not passively engage with media as they have knowledge of world politics, neither do they actively engage with or question these discourses - again speaking to notions of young people as ambiguous political subjects (Staeheli 2018). It also attests to how military-themed first person shooter and Battle Royale games have become embedded and ‘domesticated’ in social life, thus being rendered ambiguous in nature (Woodyer and Carter 2018)

Ben: *Um, yeah a little bit. Uh, obviously when I grew up, my father was in the army. So I liked them anyway sort of thing. But playing the game just made me- kind of like gave us like a link, a thing in common to talk about. Like he'd watch me playing and be like oh “Yeah that's not very realistic” or something like [laugh] “That that would never happen”, stuff like that. But they do, I think it does. I think it would like make people - I think Call of Duty especially when you're younger would have made people like want to join the army, it would have they made them like it a little bit more, definitely. I don't think it would have made anyone, it probably has, um, it would never have made me like hate the army by playing these sort of games - like even if you're*

playing on the good side or the bad side you know you get two sides. Um, but yeah I think it definitely does influence people's relation or reputation of the military, of the army.

Johnny: *I think - well this is where it gets interesting because, again, my girlfriend's family is a military family so sort of I've garnered their opinions as well and there's a huge PTSD side to it to start with. So my - (girlfriend's) step dad won't go near it, cos' he can't cope with it. He said it's fine his PTSD is not that bad, but when he hears the bangs and sees how real it is and stuff like that it takes him back to places. Her uncle's the same. I've got friends who I play cricket with who are the same, they wouldn't touch it with a barge pole, because they can't, can't even think of it, because the guns all have the real names and stuff.*

Nevertheless, for both Ben and Johnny, who have positive attitudes of the military, their opinions are also shaped by their interactions with family and friends who have been a part of the military. In doing so, they illustrate how young people's political engagements are shaped by a range of factors such as geographical location, family history and generation (Benwell et al. 2012). Furthermore, it demonstrates the domestication of geopolitics through practices of videogaming as war is brought into the domestic lives and practices of young people and enables a range of playful, and as I discuss here social encounters (Woodyer and Carter 2018). Here they talked about how the game does not give an accurate portrayal of military life. For Ben, playing these games helped in sustaining his social relationship with his ex-military father, as a topic of humorous conversation due to the latter considering these games unrealistic in their portrayal of war (Horton 2012). While, Johnny talks about how members of his partner's family and some of his friends purposefully avoid these games due to their experiences in the military. This also then speaks to how technological advances have enabled the reproduction of more authentic experiences of war. Moreover, it highlights both the indeterminate nature of play (Woodyer and Carter 2018) and how the body acts as a somatic archive (Dittmer 2015) in terms of how the immersive, 'realistic' affective qualities of these games may cause distress for some who have previously experienced 'real' war instead of those of fun and enjoyment. Significantly, it also shows young gamers as political agents were sensitive to these affects. Indeed, more broadly speaking the affective dimensions of popular culture and media are also

important to think about when considering young gamer's political engagement and participation as I come to next.

8.3 Young Gamers, Popular Culture and Politics

Wes: *I mean I don't like to, but, like, I do think it's important for everyone to be involved in, and you know have their say. Like I'll never, I'll never not vote but, I just almost see it as like, an again quite an argumentative space where people just you know, almost don't accept other's viewpoints and, it's you know. They stick to particular parties, regardless of the policies, just because kind of that's, you know what they've always done or the area they're from or whatever. So I don't really like politics that much. Um, and I can't really resonate- or a lot of the policies I see, all the kind of important things that I see, aren't really things that are classed as important, personally.*

Poppy: *Um I do, to an extent. Obviously when something huge is going on. Like at the moment with Ukraine, um, then, then yes. Um, when things are a bit more like a load of MPs arguing about the same shit different day in the UK I'm not as interested just because, um, it's old news kind of thing [laughing] Do you know what I mean? It's not a personal kind of passion of mine unless, to be honest, like unless it's going to affect me on my future directly I don't mind, I'm not getting too involved.*

Although young gamers at various points during interviews discussed prominent national and global political issues like Brexit, the Russia-Ukraine war and Black Lives Matter protests, when asked whether they were interested in politics several of them explained that they largely felt detached, with their participation mostly limited to voting in elections and signing petitions. This then echoes the work of Staehli (2018), who argues that young people are ambiguous political subjects, as despite seeming to be disengaged they may actually be interested and knowledgeable about issues, with Wes voting but taking an anti-political stance and Poppy referring to disinterest from domestic politics in contrast to her concerns on Ukraine. In addition to what I found to be a general sense of malaise in regards to national politics during these interviews, for Wes, Poppy and several other interviewees, what is considered as 'the political' does not match with their personal experiences or views as young people.

Harry: *[sigh] [...] It's like sensory overload these days, like there is just so much going on [inaudible] they kind of, go about young people and getting them interested in politics. I don't think they are any less interested necessarily than older people. I just think yeah maybe they need to be reached in different ways than, than people [inaudible] did years ago.*

Several interviewees, like Harry above, also made comments on how technology and the rise of social media has affected how younger generations encounter politics compared to older generations - illustrating its political potential(s) for communication, knowledge and action (Adams 2017). Here Harry refers to the excessive amount of news sources that are now easily accessible to the public, and how they produce what he calls “sensory overload” which I reason can be seen as the puissance or excessive, stimulating affects that result from the media assemblage(s) which increasingly permeate everyday life (Dittmer 2017). To elucidate, this “sensory overload” can be recognised as one impact of the global flows of information, money and people affecting citizens’ daily lives enabled through processes of globalisation (Saunders 2012), as everyday life becomes increasingly configured through media technologies that operate at speeds and scales beyond humans’ cognitive capacities (Boluk and LiMieux 2017).

Poppy: *Um, yeah definitely. I mean you could just say it, not even just about politics. There's so much more information, it's so much more readily available now with just the Internet in general. But social media is so in depth, and you know you've got literal [...] uh like platforms tons of followers so they can say something and, and everyone can see it. It's so much more... Intense than it was you know when people would just occasionally have a press conference and make a statement about something. People's opinions are then able to be shared and then everyone can respond and then you know, things can blow up in a really good way or a really bad way. Um so, and obviously with young people, social media is, it's kind of like their language almost and so yeah definitely, definitely. And also just- I don't even necessarily think that this started with my- I'm not gonna say generation, because that is quite a big gap. But like I'm nearly 30, and I think- I've got a lot of friends who are sort of between the ages of 20 and 25 and I see a huge, gap in terms of, even just the stuff that, that we experienced, toys that*

we played with, children TV shows that we'd watched when we were younger. It's totally different between me and, and those group of friends. And I just generally find them more... more open to, to wanting to be involved and wanting to talk about things. And I hate to use this word but they're just more... "woke" than me [laugh] and the people that when I was that age or younger.

In a similar vein, Poppy emphasises how such social media is a nexus for these global flows of information affecting people's lives (Saunders 2012) and how through its affordances for social networking, information exchange and dialogue has become increasingly important in shaping communication, knowledge and action (Adams 2017, Benwell et al. 2012). Just like Wes, and indeed several of my interviewees, Poppy directs attention to the ways in which the media has become paradoxically transparent in how information can be easily be searched for and interacted with, while opaque in the sense that it exceeds human cognition as there is an unquantifiable amount of information available. Significantly, this illustrates then how young people as networked individuals, are increasingly aware of how (the media as an apparatus of) "Empire" exists "beyond measure" (Hardt and Negri 2000). Furthermore, Poppy underscores how there are inter-generational differences within the category of young people in terms of their consumption of social media and popular culture, cautiously labelling her younger group of friends as 'woke'. Here she is self-aware of how the term 'woke' - an alertness to injustice in society - has been used pejoratively against various progressive or left-wing movements. This then further shows how young people respond to politics in different ways in part due to growing up with different forms of popular culture, again demonstrating why it is important to consider these young people as multiple media users (Taylor 2018), in addition to how popular culture as a rapidly evolving assemblage, differentially shapes (young) people's political subjectivities, identities and engagements (Caso 2018; Dittmer 2015a). Building on these arguments, I now move on to focus on how young people engage with 'small p' politics in response to social and cultural changes, specifically progressiveness within the gaming industry.

8.4 Progressiveness and Politics in Videogames

Ben: *Um, I think it should be separate. Unless like obviously when you're playing games you can talk about your interests and stuff, but no- no one ever does that. No one will ever do that I don't think. Um all players, I know, well there might be some proper weirdos that do talk about stuff like that during- when they're playing games. But you're playing games to like relax, to chill out, to get away from everything. You don't really want to start bringing politics into things, politics never makes anything fun... If anything, it causes debates and arguments and stuff, so-*

The complex and ambiguous ways through which young gamers engage with politics can be seen in how interviewees saw gaming spaces as an escape from everyday life - or as 'magic circles' i.e. distinct, delimited spaces of play that are structured by a different set of rules. Pertinently, in calling those who talk about politics in-game "weirdos", Ben infers that political discussion is a form of social transgression in (online) gaming spaces, which I argue illustrates how these ludic assemblages are generative of (a-)political subjectivities that unconsciously or otherwise lead to the reproduction of this hyper-masculine gaming technoculture. Nevertheless, as pointed out by several authors (e.g. Consalvo 2009), and as I myself have outlined throughout this thesis, videogames are not 'magic circles', with the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and streams in particular deeply entangled in contemporary processes of "Empire" in manifold ways.

Interviewer: *Do you think there is space for [politics] in gaming? Or do you think it shouldn't be a space for that kind of stuff? Or do you think it depends?*

Elliot: *I think it depends for sure that's, that's kind of the line there. You know it definitely depends on what politics are being sort of involved, I think, for sure if, people are invested in politics, and they want to kind of introduce that to young people. Gaming is a great way to do it. But it depends on the politics for sure, like it depends what you're vocalizing as, politics to people, you know. It's one of those things and it's a, it's a hugely contra- controversial thing a lot of young people, you know, whenever they hear the word politics, they just like, you know [slight hiss], they don't want anything to do with it... I myself, personally I'm not, a huge advocate but I'll involve myself to you know, to get around the, hear the word and I'll know what's happening*

in my local area stuff like that. But I'll never invest myself too much to the point where, you know I'm in the House of Commons and you know things like I'm never too invested. But um, in gaming certainly there's some politics there for sure, absolutely. Whether it comes down to, I don't know a lot of things, whether it's due to refugees, immigrants, sexualisation in gaming, racial, homopho- homophobic things, not homophobic, like homosexual things, loads and loads of things you know. I think like the diversity of things, especially, that's the biggest thing in gaming I've noticed for sure, in the last, recent 5, 10 years, diversity for sure. The fact that not only can you play, as this main character as a man, but you can play as a woman too [...]

Nevertheless, although many gamers referred to the sense of escapism these games provide (an idea I explore further in the next chapter) there was a range of opinions on the politics of play. Elliot further highlights how young people act as ambiguous political subjects (Staeheli 2018) in discussing how he has limited participation in big 'P' politics while recognising social issues around race, immigration, gender and sexuality. Significantly, he also recognises how progressive politics are increasingly becoming present in videogames, showing how he has become attuned to these changing cultural attitudes.

Elliot: *-It's, it's- Um, the fact that people now, kind of kick off at that. I mean a video game, and that kind of speaks for itself, you know it's fake to begin with, you know. So the fact that people aren't happy, like "Well game isn't realistic now because we've got some blue haired, um, you know person in the game". It's like no one cares as long as everyone's in the game having fun, playing by the rules, it's- that's what the game has always been about [...] Yeah politics, I think it's slowly easing its way into the game- into the game industry. But a lot of people are still very, um you know, quite regressive with it, they don't want anything to do with it, they kind of want to stick in their little own bubble, um and pretend like they didn't just see some character throwing sparkles, and all this stuff around. They want to see guns, they want to see fire, they want to see blood all this, you know the typical manly crap you know [...] a lot of people, um, tend to get really angry over little things that are introduced in gaming now like new characters, and their backgrounds, or the fact that it's supposed to represent a certain*

community, you know they get really sort of for some reason agitated with that and... You know it's a really concerning aspect with gaming now [...] But that's for me personally that's one thing I noticed and I just think wow that's really toxic and it's not something that belongs in gaming, why is it here? Um...

Elliot is largely accepting of progressiveness in videogames, and does not take games seriously, as he acknowledges they are not realistic representations of war, but are simply meant to be a form of escapism and fun. Significantly, he also strongly critiques the vocal but regressive elements of the gaming scene highlighting how this has resulted in high levels of toxicity (Gandolfi and Ferdig 2022). Moreover, in referring to the toxic preferences of this reactionary group as “typical manly crap” he contests the hegemonic discourses of this hyper-masculine gaming technoculture and the notion that these games are ‘magic circles’, thus further illustrating how young gamers are ambiguous political subjects. In addition, Elliot and several other interviewees, cynically identify how progressivism has become another way of marketing, despite how videogames like those from the *Call of Duty* series had previously been marketed to “hard-core” white male audiences in this ‘global’ market (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009). Crucially, adding to our current understanding of “Empire”, this process is indicative of how as Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2021) similarly argue, “Empire” is paradoxically both victorious and collapsing. To be precise, through exploiting the indefinite potential for capital by attracting a more diverse audience and commodifying videogames, the gaming industry exacerbates social antagonisms within the digital gaming scene.

Johnny: *I think there is an open space, and I think it's it's gonna have to come from both sides. It's gonna have to be a willingness from people who play the games to go “right, what are the issues and how do we solve them?” And it's gonna have to come from the other side of the gaming industry to go “okay well we're causing this separation, how do we get it back together” so [...] It's a very important space, because, if you looked at the figures here the amount of people who had a gaming console in the household I think it'd be- I guess it'd be in the 70s to 80s percents [...] And so you, you can get a message out to 70%, 80% of people that you know this isn't right and we, we need to sort it out so... Again, I think it comes from both sides, but I think there is this huge*

space for it and an important space for it as well because we're gonna have, we're gonna have to think about the way we get these messages across because, the news is only watched now by a certain generation. I don't know any 18 year olds who clock on at six o'clock to watch BBC News anymore, you know... And I don't know many people that don't get their information from Twitter, Facebook, Instagram anymore. So, um, and if they do they're a bit older anyway. So we need to think of different ways to get these messages out and understanding.

Nevertheless, in contrast to the more ambiguous political subjectivities of Ben and Elliot, Johnny takes a more explicitly political subjectivity. Having discussed his interest in big 'P' politics since childhood, Johnny considers the potential pedagogical elements of these games and argues that these should be a space for political discussions. Again, he also turns to socio-cultural shifts in terms of how the main source of this information for young people is social media, further illustrating its political potential(s) for communication, knowledge and action (Adams 2017) as well as the need for further attention to be paid how these global flows of information (potentially) shape young people's everyday lives (Saunders 2012). In doing so, while not challenging "Empire" explicitly, he directs attention to how the multitudinous activity occurring within contemporary videogaming culture and other digital spaces could potentially be used in a form of counter-gaming (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009, 2021). Altogether, these young gamers illuminate how they as distinct individuals each have their own complex, political subjectivities, which are in part constructed through their everyday encounters with 'excessive' flows of media and popular culture, but also their social relations with friends, family and others – including other gamers. Yet, in thinking about social media, I wish to again acknowledge that little attention has been paid to the political affordances of Twitch, in how it acts as social platform and digital interface that facilitates the monetisation of streamer's content. Subsequently, in the final sections of this chapter the attention turns to the political agencies of streamers and viewers, both as first-bodies politic and second-bodies politic (that being the stream sub-community) in further exploring the political and economic dimensions of Battle Royale Twitch streams.

8.5 Militarisation and Neo-Liberalism in Battle Royale Videogame Twitch Streams

As discussed throughout this thesis, the hegemonic geopolitical imaginaries and military representations in Battle Royale videogames like *Call of Duty: Warzone* (e.g. Bos 2018b; Power 2007; Smicker 2010) are characteristic of other forms of militainment in terms of how they are designed to produce the subject of the citizen-soldier (Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter 2009; Stahl 2010). However, as noted in Chapter 6, it should also be recognised how these games and also significantly streams are involved in engendering spectators and streamers alike as neo-liberal subjects. In particular, in the production of the retention economy there has been an ongoing micro-commodification of the game industry (Ash 2013).

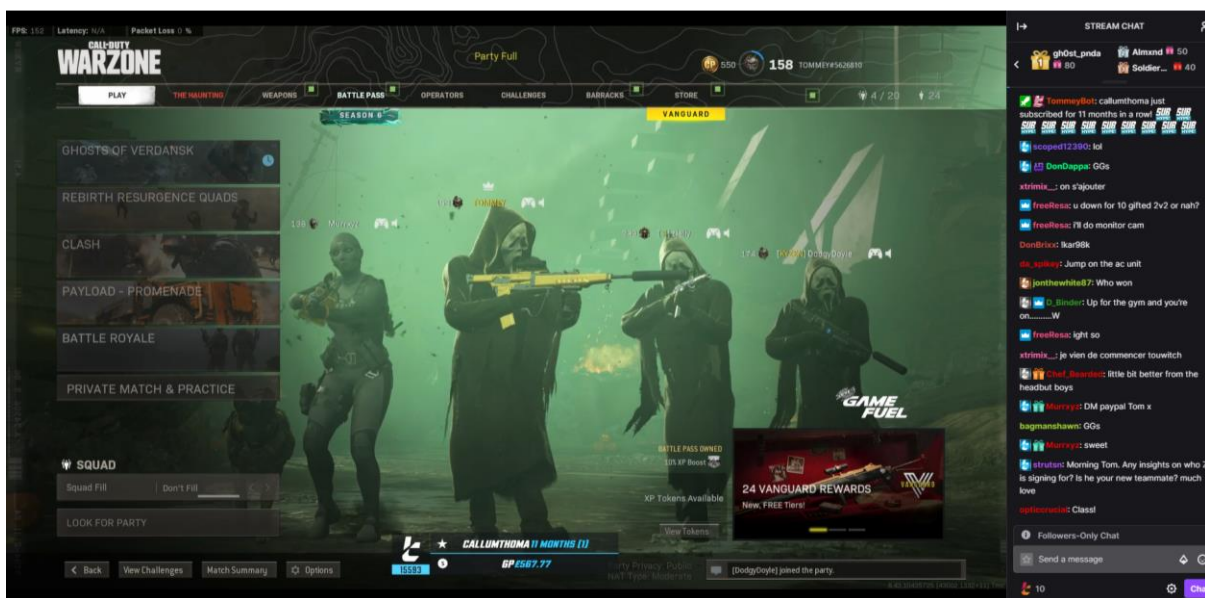
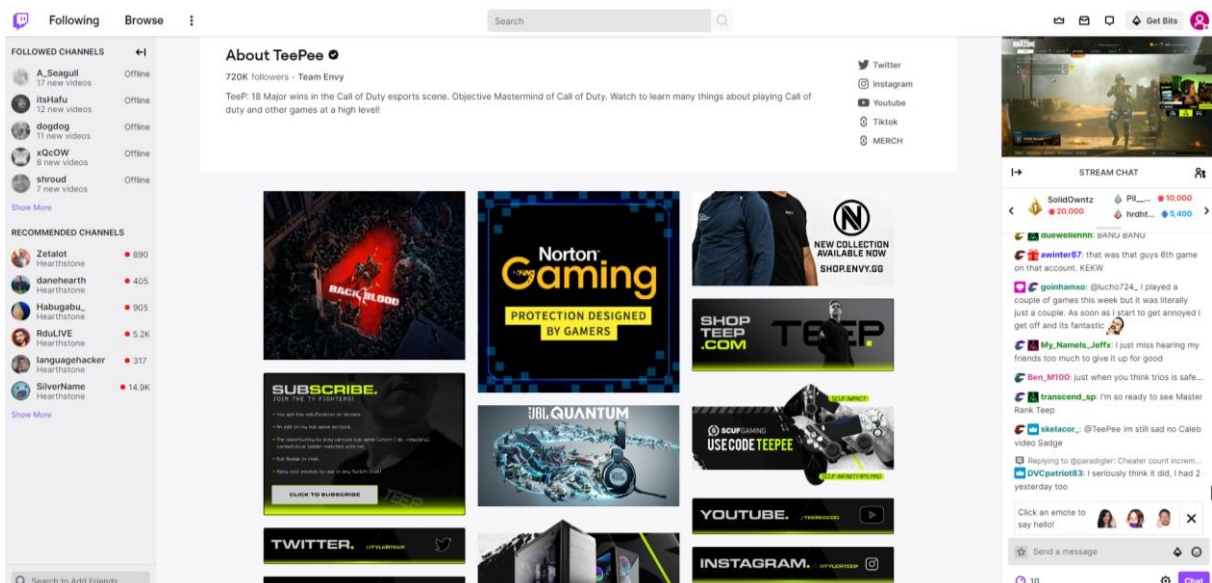
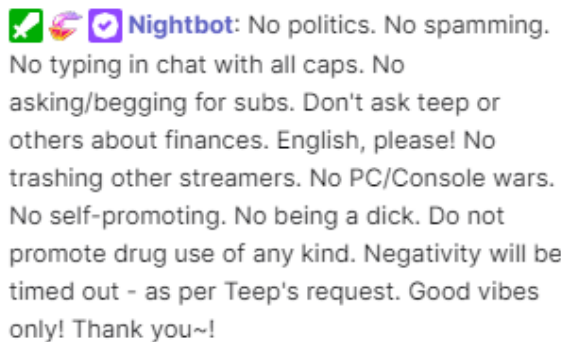


Figure 36: Screenshot of Twitch stream of *Call of Duty: Warzone*, in which the streamer is using a yellow-coloured weapon and alongside two team-mates is using the Ghostface ‘skin’.

Instructive of these processes are ‘skins’ which alter the appearance of the player’s character, weapons and other equipment, like as shown in *Figure 36*. Importantly, these ‘skins’ can be seen as reproducing the discourse of techno-fetishism (Stahl 2010: 28), in enabling players to alter the appearance of their avatar in aesthetically-pleasing ways, be it as simple as changing the colour of their gun like the streamer above, to give them an inherent beauty, despite the fact it is still a weapon. Nonetheless, many of these skins are not always military-themed and many are in fact a reference to other forms of popular culture, with for instance the option to buy skins of famous horror film villains such as ‘Ghostface’, the main villain in the *Scream* series around Halloween. Thus, these ‘skins’ are another example of how cultural properties, titles

and subjects are exchanged between cinema, comics and video games within a convergent entertainment complex (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009: xvi). These forms of commercialisation demonstrate how the twin facets of ludocapitalism and ‘militainment’ that are instructive of “Empire” can work together to suffuse ideas, values and aesthetics of militarism into the ‘everyday’ lives of citizens through the sphere of popular culture (Basham 2011; Giroux 2004; Davies and Philpott 2012). Nonetheless, these geopolitical and economic processes have since become further intensified through streaming, as streamers look to monetise their own content creation.





An explicit example of these entanglements with “Empire”, is the sponsoring of a streamer by the US Army National Guard, as shown above in *Figure 37*. Although this sponsorship by the US military was only found once during fieldwork, this particular channel is run by one of the most popular *Warzone* streamers (at the time of fieldwork they had over 700,000 subscribers). In this way, the space of Twitch streams illustrate a convergence of the use of social media and military-themed games as tools for recruitment (Rech 2016). However, perhaps more significantly, it is instructive of the hyper-masculine ‘geek’ technoculture that encompasses digital spaces like Twitch streams. For instance, the streamer is also displaying links and discount codes on their channel and stream(s) for viewers to buy the same products and brands. Significantly, such products include technological hardware, like controllers, headphones and graphics cards that viewers would use in their own gameplay. These

advertisements of gaming peripherals work to reify the white male gamer identity through its discursive construction of a particular model of masculinity grounded in war, mastery over the game and the gaining of unfair advantages (Srauy and Palmer-Mehta 2018). Likewise, streamers often share their own game builds, showing what in-game weapons and equipment that they are using in their play. Both of these practices are demonstrations of Payne's notion (2010) of technology fetishism, where having the knowledge of the right equipment is sacred, especially for PC gaming where technology can support the 'best' war experiences. The ways in which this aestheticised 'correct' equipment is given symbolic currency is then a ludic reproduction of second trope of spectacular war, in terms of how this high-tech weaponry is celebrated and venerated, because of how it gives them a performance advantage and therefore the capacity to overpower low-tech 'barbaric' enemies (Stahl 2010: 28). Therefore, in reproducing these militaristic, hyper-technophilic discourses, streamers exemplify this new hyper-capitalist phase of "Empire". As both a 'soldier-citizen' and 'worker-consumer' who simultaneously conducts and commodifies ludic war, the Twitch streamer extracts value from violence that is "beyond measure", while also fortifying the oligopolistic dominance of Amazon.

The streamer also displayed advertisements for non-gaming products such as the energy drink brand Monster as shown by the fridge in the background of his gaming room, Fireball (alcoholic drink) - sporty and masculine type brands which links to the main demographic of Western gamers as young, white males (Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter 2009). Indeed, it should be pointed out here that over two thirds of Twitch users are male, with half these users being under the age of 30 (Elad 2023). Again, as discussed in the previous chapter, these advertisements are instructive of the neo-liberal masculinity produced through the intersections between military, nerd/geek and jock masculinities, one that is important to their marketability and successful affective labour (Taylor and Chess 2018). It is also important to link this to how the domestic spaces in which streamers conduct their playbour also become extensions of their personalities (Ruberg and Lark 2021) with things like the fridge full of Monster energy drinks being used to reaffirm their identity as both a hyper-masculine, professional streamer/soldier. In doing so, the streamer further embodies both of "Empire"'s twin vital subjectivities of the 'soldier-citizen' and 'worker-consumer' (Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter 2009). Altogether, this example further highlights the relations between militarism,

technology and masculinity, in addition to how Twitch streaming of ludic war has become intertwined with the retention economy, as well as other modes of ludocapitalism under “Empire”. Yet, there has been little focus paid to the actual political consequences or dimensions of such processes, which I now look to begin to remedy in the next section.

8.5.1 Politics in Battle Royale Videogame Twitch Streams

As discussed earlier in this chapter, young gamers as complex and often ambiguous political agents take different views on P/politics, with some seeing it as form of escapism from everyday life and others highlighting its political potentials. This same ambiguity extends to many Twitch streams of Battle Royale videogames, as highlighted in *Figure 37*, where the streamer’s sponsorship with the US Army National Guard in the production of recruitment materials can be juxtaposed with how the rules of the streamer’s channel. As shown in *Figure 37c*, this includes the phrases “no politics”, “not being a dick” and “negativity will be timed out” as the streamer intends to produce “good vibes only” - an ambiguous but notionally positive affective state of fun and entertainment. This implies that politics due its contentious nature can result in negative, antagonistic affects that would destabilise the ludic assemblage, thus jeopardising the streamer’s efforts to monetise their own created content. This then illustrates how processes of neo-liberalism and militarisation coalesce in making the space ‘apolitical’, where hegemonic discourses of domination are naturalised and ‘taken-for-granted’ in the ‘magic circles’ of the Battle Royale gaming scene.

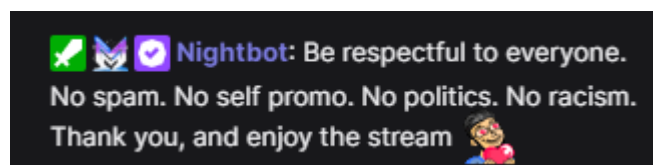


Figure 38: Cut-out of a screenshot, showing another Nightbot messaging displaying the rules of the stream.

In fact, as shown in both *Figure 37c* and *Figure 38*, rules around “no politics” are typical of most streamers and channels, with political conversation being considered an inviolable, social transgression on a similar level to ‘toxic’ behaviours like spam or racism and policed as such by moderators. This then again illustrates how processes of neo-liberalism and militarisation

coalesce in making the space 'apolitical' i.e. a magic circle where hegemonic discourses of domination are naturalised and 'taken-for-granted' in the Battle Royale gaming scene. Moreover, this should be related to how as discussed in the previous chapter that any conversations on politics that do take place are usually typical of an idiosyncratic 'stream-humour' which is in turn instructive of a hyper-masculine gaming technoculture, being banal, vulgar or even toxic in nature.

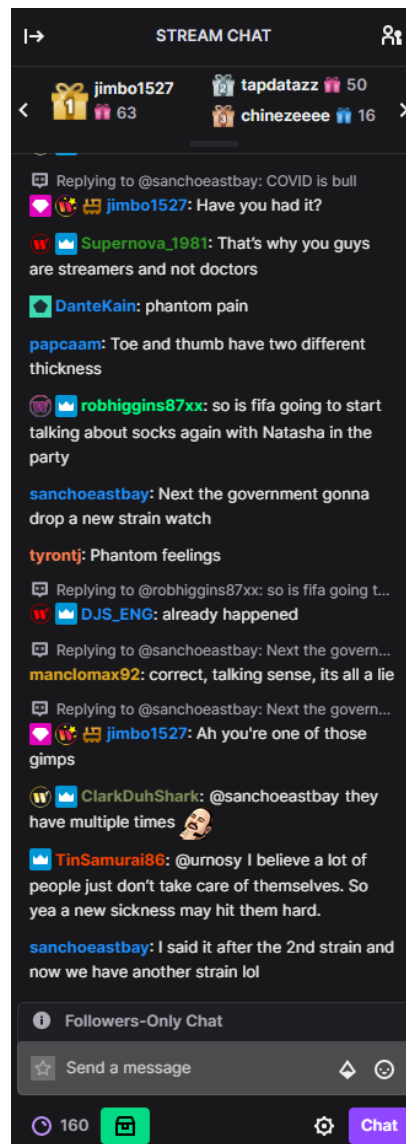


Figure 39: Screenshot of a chat window showing a viewer spreading Covid-19 conspiracies and replies from another viewer.

On the other hand, this is not always the case as shown above in *Figure 39*, where in one stream, a viewer was talking about conspiracies and the Covid-19 pandemic, considering it a hoax and something made up by the government. As Jones (2012) writes conspiracy functions

as a common if irrational response to the messy complexity of the world for differently placed subjects, pervading through domains of politics, science and popular culture. In other words, these irrational discourses can be considered as another consequence of the intense, global flows of information that shape citizens daily lives (Saunders 2012). Nevertheless, here it is also important to link conspiracies with the rise of the alt-right and reactionary politics in digital spaces including that of Twitch streams, as it demonstrates the intensifying social antagonisms and divisions driven by “Empire” (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2021).

Strikingly none of these messages were deleted by moderators - suggesting this discussion was not deemed to be political - however they did not remain unchallenged with another viewer calling the Covid-19 conspiracist a gimp - i.e. an unpleasant or stupid person. Subsequently, this demonstrates the social and political affordances of Twitch, in terms of how the chat window allows for debate and the exchanging of different knowledges (Adams 2015) be it the for the purposes of ludic collaboration (as outlined in Chapter 6) or disseminating conspiracy theories. Furthermore, this example shows these spaces can still act as sites of political contestation and that viewers are not entirely transformed into a collective, apolitical subject in a form of synchronic emergence within the ludic assemblages (Dittmer 2017; Protevi 2009) - or ‘magic circles’ - of streams, but instead retain their own individual political subjectivity when talking to each other. As such, this sheds further light on how young gamers, viewers and streamers perform as complex and ambiguous political subjects in these digital, gaming spaces. Likewise, it demonstrates a need for further investigation into the politics of Twitch as a social media platform centred on a hyper-masculine gaming technoculture, especially when thinking about the rise of reactionary, alt-right groups in digital spaces like these streams who may work on the regressive political potentials of such assemblages and bring about a fascistic alternative to “Empire” (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2021).

8.6 Concluding Remarks

This chapter has explored how young gamers think about, engage with and participate in politics in their everyday lives, including in relation to cultural and technological shifts in videogaming. After initially reviewing previous work within critical geopolitics and political geographical scholarship on children and young people, it made clear that greater attention

should be paid to how their agencies, subjectivities and dispositions are shaped through their interactions with videogames and a broader assemblage of popular culture. I then explored how young gamers' interpretations of hegemonic geopolitical imaginaries and military representations in Battle Royale videogames like *Call of Duty: Warzone* are largely passive or ambivalent, but are also shaped in part by their interactions with friends and family. Following this, I discussed the ambiguous political subjectivities of several young gamers in terms of their lack of participation in 'big P' politics, in addition to how their political engagements have been affected by intensifying 'global' media flows. In the penultimate section, I examined how young gamers sensitively engage with 'small p' politics through practices of videogaming, finding that they were ambivalent if not affirmative of progressive politics within gaming and in fact critical of the reactionary, sexist and racist elements of gaming culture (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2021). Finally, this chapter charted how Twitch streams of Battle Royale videogames have been configured as 'apolitical' spaces or 'magic circles' by streamers, despite their political affordances as a form of social media, and how these streams work as forms of both militainment and ludocapitalism. As such, I have emphasised the complexities and ambiguities of young gamers, streamers and viewers as political subjects, and illuminated how their dispositions, engagements and interpretations are in part shaped through flows of media and popular culture – including affective playbour for streamers – in addition to their social relations with friends, families and the wider gaming scene.

Chapter 9: Violence, Moral Panics, and Addiction in Ludic Assemblage

This chapter focuses on how young gamers have encountered and negotiated the violent and addictive qualities of videogames through immersive practices of videogaming. To begin with, this chapter will review the literature done on young people's play, risk and violence, before illustrating young gamers' nuanced views on the moral panics surrounding violent content in these games and how they were in fact more concerned with the addictive aspects of these games. By doing so, I will further emphasise the ambiguity of play, in looking at how young gamers throughout their life course have had a number of complex entanglements with videogames as a (potentially) addictive form of escapism from everyday life. Here there will be a focus on the ambiguity of violence, in thinking about how it emerges in a variety of forms, including in relation to their addictive qualities and micro-transactions. Lastly, this chapter will again turn to Twitch streaming as a form of ludocapitalism, as I examine the increasingly blurry lines between gaming and gambling, which have shaped how streamers monetise their immaterial playbour. By doing so, I will illuminate how (Battle Royale) videogames and Twitch streams are co-constitutive of a multiplicity of violences intrinsic to "Empire", not just the representations of ludic war found in military-themed first-person shooters and Battle Royale videogames like *Call of Duty: Warzone*.

9.1 Youth, Play, Risk and Violence in Everyday Life

As outlined in the literature review, a great deal of work in the social sciences has focused on the links between childhood and play (e.g. Harker 2005; Holloway and Valentine 2000; Katz 2004). Nevertheless, as Woodyer (2012) argues, the common association of play with childhood is problematic, because of how it hinders our appreciation of play as an important geographical concern throughout people's life courses, one beyond the scope of just children's geographies. This lacuna is especially peculiar when as Nayak and Kehily (2013: 16) note, in sharp contrast to the creative and constructive ways in which children's play is cast especially from a child developmentalist perspective, young people's play and leisure activities are commonly seen as potentially threatening and disturbing. This perception is due to how a) young people who play are considered unfit for adulthood, and b) play is seen as a form of resistance (Woodyer 2012). As Aitken (2019) argues young people impart a sense of revolutionary playfulness in their political activism and engagement that is in turn dismissed

or feared by adults. Young people have subsequently become associated with threat, danger and 'moral panics' - which as outlined by the sociologist and criminologist Stanley Cohen (2002: 1) are "[a] condition, episode, person or group of persons [that] emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests". Subjects of moral panics, alongside young people - and in particular young working-class violent males - include; school violence, psychoactive drugs, childhood sexual abuse, violent and/or sexual media content, welfare cheats and single mothers, and refugees and asylum seekers. As Cohen explains, the extent or significance of phenomena that is politically and socially constructed as a 'moral panic' is exaggerated out of proportion in relation to both the threat itself, and other serious issues. This bares similarities with work in emotional geopolitics, with Pain et al. (2010: 972) for instance remarking that "[y]oung people as a whole are increasingly the focus of the fears, rather than the hopes, of western societies, variously labelled as dangerous, deviant, under-achieving, obese, vulnerable and over-protected". Likewise, as Hörschelmann and Colls (2009: 4) write "[s]een as both *risky* and *at risk*, young people's bodies become markers of the state and the social body now and in the future". Here they discuss how the succession of societal fears, anxieties and concerns that result from the potential rupturing of 'Western', romanticised notions of childhood as a time of playful innocence, has subsequently led to the biopolitical regulation of children's wellbeing to secure the future of the state. Thinking about this notion of young people as risky subjects then is important when considering how, as discussed in the last chapter, these ludic assemblages are productive of a range of political subjectivities.

This social construction and regulation of young people as 'risky'/'at risk' can be seen in how play has increasingly retreated to domestic spaces due to the perceived risks of children's use of public space (Woodyer et al. 2018). However, even more pertinently here the regulation of children and young people by the state has also become entangled in processes of militarisation (Burridge and McSorley 2015; Rech 2016). This can be seen in a study by Basham (2011) who unpacks the distinctions between 'soldiers' and those labelled as 'hoodies', which refers to violent, young, working-class males from deprived socio-economic backgrounds. Basham questions the popular notion that military service can solve youth violence, arguing that the discursive divide of organised (military) violence versus disorganised (criminal) violence in fact actually works to conceal the cruelty of broader structural conditions against

British children. Here such conditions can be seen as instructive of “Empire” and the notion of banal war, where it is seen as a permanent social relation and a regime of biopower (Hardt and Negri 2000, 2004). Another target of ‘moral panic’ is ‘violent’ content in videogames, which has frequently been linked to youth violence (Leonard 2009, Shaw and Warf 2009). As Cohen (2002) writes there is an extensive history of moral panics over the supposed harmful effects of exposure to popular media and cultural forms, despite rather dubious evidence for such claims. Cohen elucidates how such moral panics are based on and sustained by ‘common-sense’ claims made by authorities following the simplistic ‘media effects’ model, where exposure to violence through a form of media, be it a comic, film or indeed a videogame, then causes, stimulates or elicits violent behaviour. There has been much debate in psychology over the relationship between violent video games and violence in everyday life, about whether or not a ‘bleed’ exists (Shaw and Warf 2009). For instance, one meta-analysis finds a positive correlation between violent content in video games and aggression and aggression-related variables, while pro-social videogames (in which the predominant goal is to benefit another game character) had the opposite effects (Greitemeyer and Mügge 2014). Yet, as Chumbley and Griffiths (2006) remark, this correlation between game play and behaviour may actually denote backwards causation in that aggressive people may be attracted to these violent video games in the first place. Shaw and Warf (2009) look to straddle this divide in proposing that this relationship may in fact be a simultaneously determinant phenomenon.

Nevertheless, all these approaches fail to account for the broader social, cultural and political contexts of these digital worlds, unlike scholarship within geography and related disciplines, where as discussed in Chapter 2 there has been numerous critical analyses of military-themed videogames, their geopolitical dimensions and their links with the militarisation of everyday life. Likewise, as this thesis argues, the affects of these ludic assemblages are indeterminate on the body, so such simplistic explanations ignore the ambiguous nature of both play and violence. Moreover, as I discuss here, it is important to recognise how these games have become socially embedded in young people’s lives as a form of escapism. For instance, to refer back to the centrality of fear to the current geopolitical order, as Huntemann (2010) argues, war-themed games have enabled gamers to play through sanitised fantasises, uncomplicated by ethical questions and the gory details of warfare to (temporarily) ‘cope with terror’. Or more simply put, these games make war banal and less fearful for these players. Subsequently,

Huntemann illustrates how counter to the media discourse around violent content, such games may actually have positive, therapeutic affects in calming players in the 'fearful' post-9/11 geopolitical climate. Finally, as Hörschelmann (2016) comments in a discussion of militaristic transgressions into children's everyday spaces, 'war play' including that of military-themed videogames, is only occasionally inclined to 'moral panic' around the effects of violent imagery. Instead, it is commonly perceived as a natural extension of children's tendencies to fight and 'test' their strength. She argues that this a deeply problematic claim, both in the way it works to normalise war and its presence in children's lives, as well as the way it absolves adults from responsibility by making children responsible for their 'violent play'. Likewise, as I explore here it should be recognised how the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames are instructive of a multiplicity of prosaic violence, beyond that of representations of military violence. Subsequently, this chapter builds on this literature in highlighting the ambiguous nature of play, violence, risk and youth, and the complex relations between these phenomena as they emerge in everyday life through practices of videogaming, spectating and streaming. Accordingly, the following sections attend to three 'risks' that could be associated with these ludic assemblages; those being a) violent content in media like videogames, b) young people, and in particular young, working-class men, and c) the addictiveness of videogaming - with the first two of these also being noted as common targets of moral panic by social scientists. In critically examining how these three 'risks' potentially emerge and intersect in these ludic assemblages, I assess whether these 'risks' are simply socially constructions or may in fact have real, material affects in the everyday.

9.2 Moral Panics, Violence and Battle Royale Videogames

Elliot: *The way the media portrays it for sure. I mean the media has always had this sort of like firm grip on it, if you want to say. Like they always try and manipulate like a certain, older audience to say like this is what gaming is now, this is what it does to young people, this is our hope for the future kind of thing like that. It's total nonsense, you know. People can play video- it's the same as watching movies, like you know you think back the movies back then, and how you know practical effects were so gruesome and graphical. You know it's had- you've got to think like now, mostly CG (computer-generated) like it's not going to affect people at all. It's just people need to understand the fine line between reality and fiction. And if you know that that's a sound mind, in my opinion. But the way the media portrays the fact that young people have no grasp on real life and stuff because of video*

games or it's affecting the way they, um come across normal day to day sort of occurrences, you know [sigh] [...]

Interviewees were alert to - and to a certain extent were critical of - the moral panics centred on the levels of graphic violence within (Battle Royale) videogames, pointing out that it is not just a simple positive correlation with aggression, thus challenging much of the work done in psychological scholarship. Indeed, they mainly highlight how the media look to reproduce negative discourses around young people and videogaming. Equally however, they point to differences in terms of the age of the players and level of (graphical) realism produced within these games in terms of how that may affect young people differently. For example, Elliot offers a strong critique of the media and in referring to the similarities between films and games, indirectly points to how such moral panics had in the past been targeted towards older forms of media like horror films until they became steadily accepted over time (Cohen 2002). Thus, the views of Elliot and other young people support Cohen's (2002) argument that the 'risks' from exposure to violence are in fact social constructions. Additionally, this distrust or disdain for the media for how it portrays certain narratives, illustrates again how young gamers still act as ambiguous political subjects (Staeheli 2018). As such, Elliot and others underscore why it is important to listen to young people's perspectives on these issues to provide more sensitive, nuanced understandings about the social affects/effects of these games in their everyday lives.

Poppy: *I think there's kind of this like stereotypical like a little bit outdated view that "Oh if, if kids are playing video games and they're shooting people then they're going to want to go out and shoot people", and I think that's stupid. I don't think it's as simple as that. Um, especially, obviously in our country, where we have a total different you know gun culture to others- America. But I just don't think it directly equates. I think people don't give kids- obviously depending on the age- but I think people don't give kids enough credit to be able to separate reality from, games or, movies or, TV programs. I think you know they understand that it's not real and that you know in real life, you can't go and shoot someone or hit a llama until bricks come out of it because that's not real life. And kids, even though they're kids and their imaginations are potentially harnessed better than ours, um they're not idiots. But on a smaller scale*

and- So, like my nephew is, how old is he? He's just turned six so he's like tiny you know he's really, he's a little boy, and he is so- he just absolutely loves Fortnite and if we're not playing Fortnite and if I'm with him he's doing a dance from it, you know because it's- he wants to learn the dance, and all that, and he is quite, um, out of any of the kids he's probably the most likely want to come up and like karate chop ya. You know what I mean? And I think that's a small example of- you've seen that somewhere, and now you want to do it, but you're not supposed to do it. So in, in like small examples when they're that young, I think, obviously it needs to be kind of reinstated that it's not okay. But generally stance is that kids are not stupid and they understand the difference between and what's acceptable and real in a game, and real life.

Poppy argues that young children are able to recognise the difference between the 'real world' and 'gaming worlds' despite their age, but does note how her nephew has been affected by inappropriately imitating certain moves from his interactions with media. This then further illustrates the affective, embodied qualities of these videogames, as well as how popular culture 'sticks' to human bodies in shaping their interactions outside of these games (Caso 2018; Dittmer 2015a). Moreover, it shows how videogaming and popular culture shapes and produces social relations (Horton 2012). Interestingly, Poppy also refers to a cultural difference between the UK and USA where firearms are more prevalent and the levels of gun violence is higher, and so infers that the risk of this bleed effect is less of a concern in the UK. Poppy's answer therefore suggests that these different political/national subjectivities may account for the resultant behaviours from engaging with the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames (Grayson 2018). Although, it does also speak to a slight uncertainty about the potential risks of these games, with Poppy assuaged by the fact any significant acts of violence would occur 'over there' rather than close to home.

Poppy: *Um, I think it's- I mean not to stereotype, but I think it's definitely popular with younger players, because it is more cartoony and colourful which I think is probably a selling point from the parents' point of view. Certainly, for my siblings who you know they've allowed my nieces and nephews to play, and my- I was trying to- because the kids were desperate to play, and they are pretty young they're like seven, six, seven and eight, the three that play. And, and my siblings were like "Yeah no they're too young to*

play that kind of game” but I said “Yeah look yes there's shooting and essentially you are trying to kill people but there's no blood, no one falls down”. You know when, when you eliminate someone they get like sucked up they kind of disappear there isn't kind of the regular connotations to like violent video games. Um so, so there's that from a parent's perspective. And also, I think it's just a bit more easy going, you know there's the dances and the costumes and all that kind of stuff so I just think it's, it's more appealing to younger market, and I think the market probably, uh, don't know, do dominate in deciding what's popular or not in terms of sales and stuff.

Later in the interview, Poppy highlights how such games are seen by older non-gamers as risky for young people, as she needed to convince her siblings to let her nieces and nephews play *Fortnite* – and even then they are only allowed to play under her supervision. This further accentuates the socially constructed nature of the moral panics around the violent content on these games, as despite players conducting digitally-mediated violence in all of these Battle Royales, the ‘risks’ of this violence are posited to be dependent on the levels of graphical realism that these games produce. Likewise, it relates back to Katz’s (2007, 2008) ideas about how practices of surveillance and hypervigilance are used to protect children and young people against these ‘risks’. Significantly, Poppy also brings to light the way in which *Fortnite*, despite not being a military-themed Battle Royale videogame, still reproduces the first trope of clean warfare, where masking the costs of (ludic) war - here with a lack of blood and dead bodies disappearing - results in a representation of war as hygienic (Salter 2010; Stahl 2010). Specifically, these representations of war in *Fortnite* as palatable, “easy-going” and entertaining for even the youngest audiences, due to the “more cartoony and colourful” aesthetics of the game, illuminates how war has become a permanent social condition (Hardt and Negri 2000, 2004). Altogether then, interviewees underscore some of the ways in which Battle Royale videogames - beyond those that are explicitly military-themed - are instructive of “Empire” in producing different forms of prosaic violence. This is why it is crucial to explore Battle Royale videogames as a genre more broadly and map their violent, masculine and geopolitical dimensions to better understand the diversity of social affects/effects that these games have on young gamers.

Johnny: *You know I think I think it's probably quite hypocritical of me considering I'm somebody who plays it but umm... I think it's a bit close to home now. I think it's a bit*

far now. Like, as I say, the cartoony version you didn't think, you know that's a real world, as I say, you're shooting zombies and the graphics aren't great. Whereas now everything is so real and it's set up to be as real as possible that, when you shoot someone in the head and blood goes everywhere, and you look at the dead body on the floor. You know, most of us in our lives, have never seen a dead body [Interviewer: Yeah] And hope not to, it's not something we go and look for is it? Whereas now it almost normalises and desensitises that dead body on the floor. And I'm not saying, people will walk past it, but I think people would you know, think differently about that person now [...] But I think obviously it's fun, as I say, it's an insight into a life we'd never have and we're nice people, and you know we never got to join a gang and we're never going to be part of the army or we're not going to do whatever. So it gives us that insight, a bit of fun of running around with guns, but I guess it's better people running around with guns in a game than in real life.

Nevertheless, as Johnny argues, there should be concerns about the affects over the levels of graphical realism produced through these games in terms of how they may desensitise and alter players' thought around death in 'real life'. Johnny thereby demonstrates how players have various complicated and sometimes antagonistic entanglements with videogaming by calling himself a "hypocrite". Moreover, he infers that it is better that (young) people conduct digital, ludic violence over 'real', physical violence. In effect, he hints at a hierarchy of violence according to risk and in turn underscores how war has become an interminable social condition in everyday life (Hardt and Negri 2000, 2004). Ultimately, this is instructive of the ambiguity of ludic violence in military-themed Battle Royale videogames, and indeed videogaming more broadly, in terms of how their (potential) affects on young people are indeterminate in nature (Woodyer and Carter 2020). This is why it is vital to engage with young people as social and political agents to understand the ways in which these videogames have become deeply entangled and embedded in their everyday life and to unveil the ways these games work to animate "Empire".

9.2.1 Violence, "Empire" and Sporting Masculinities

Some interviewees talked differently about the links between violence and aggression and military-themed Battle Royales, saying that other genres of videogames cause more negative and antagonistic affects due to their competitive aspects. For example, Wes explains that the frustration comes from consistently losing games and how he was in fact more stressed or angry when playing games from the *FIFA* series of football simulation games, rather than *Call of Duty* (this full quote can be seen on pages 112-113). In doing so, he notes how the affects of playing videogames cannot be predicted from their content due to the indeterminate nature of the event of play, challenging the notion that exposure to violence causes people to become violent. Nevertheless, as discussed in the Chapter 7, the competitive nature of many videogames derives from the “hard-core” subjectivity produced through the hyper-masculine technoculture that is in turn instructive of “Empire” (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009). This illustrates why there is a need to explore the affective dimensions of these games more broadly, beyond just how players embody soldiers in military-themed first person shooters. Or in other words, there is a need to think about the many subjectivities produced through videogames, not just that of the ‘solider-citizen’ to better understand how the medium is exemplary of “Empire”.

Wes: *I’m pretty good with stuff like that and I don’t, think so, but I’ve definitely like... Right there’s definitely [laugh] I’m sure I can think of like one or two times when I really got annoyed playing and I’ll like you know, punch my bed [punching other hand] I’ll you know, I just need to get some anger out and punch my bed, and even then I think that, “Wow I should not be doing this, this is just a video game”. But like its different because if I’m playing like Mario Kart with- which we did at uni a lot, like me and the four guys I that lived with. Like we [laughing] you know we’d like, maybe wrestle a bit after one of them blue shells or anything. But not in like it, you know, not in a violent way just in like a playful- you know no different to playing football outside or whatever.*

When asked further about moments of frustration and anger from playing videogames, Wes acknowledged how on occasion the puissance (Dittmer 2017) or excess of affects from these ludic assemblages led them to punching the bed, an act which they recognise as being irrational - thus illustrating how play exceeds rationality through its affective dimensions (Woodyer 2012). Furthermore, he also noted how when playing *Mario Kart* with his housemates at university that they would sometimes playfully wrestle with each other after

being “blue-shelled”, just as they would do in other competitive activities such as playing football. Specifically, this homosocial/homoerotic practice of playful wrestling again brings attention to the complex relations between heteronormativity, masculinity and gaming/play as similar sensual affects circulate in these two complex ludic assemblages (Taylor and Chess 2018). This instance then speaks to the need to consider other forms of violence beyond that of experiences/representations of war in military-themed videogames to understand the full range of their affective potentials. Additionally, it shows the ambiguity of violence and play, and the relations between the two, as both intertwine in everyday practices of masculine bonding in ludic assemblages of a *Mario Kart* game and football, demonstrating how popular culture is constitutive of social relations (Horton 2012) - but so is violence.

Johnny: *Because it's the same attitude, because if you think about it, you're playing on a team, you're playing you know in this little bubble with somebody else who's supporting the same thing as you that there's these little micro aggressions that come out I'd say, and I think that's where you know... Part of the issue comes from, because you know if your mate dies or somebody shoots you or whatever it's like the other team scoring isn't it, you're a bit like [sigh], deflated and you have a go at someone or you know I don't know at a football match but you'd have a go at someone like "Why did you die?" or "What are you doing? Or, you know kind of things where throw your hands up when you come away disappointed kind of thing [...]*

Adding to this, Johnny compares the emotional and affective dimensions of playing football to that of playing videogames, in discussing how the competitive aspects of these games can result in toxic behaviours, practices and affects like micro-aggressions. Specifically, it highlights how toxicity in terms of its affects can be cyclical in nature, as frustrated players may engage in further negative behaviours - be it from conceding a goal in football to being killed in a videogame (Gandolfi and Ferdig 2022). Furthermore, it again shows how the body acts as both a somatic archive and site of affective interaction as various forms of play intersect in producing subjectivities (Caso 2018; Dittmer 2015a). This is especially important when thinking about the broader connections between masculinity and play, and how gaming technoculture results in the production of hyper-masculine, “hard-core” subjectivities (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009; Taylor and Chess 2018). Indeed, while the playing of

videogames may not result in physical violence, as found in media (re)producing the moral panics surrounding violent content in these games, as argued in Chapter 7, toxic behaviour(s) like micro-aggressions are productive of symbolic violence. In thinking about how these games and their emergent ludic assemblages are productive of a multiplicity of violence(s) beyond representations of military violence and physical violence, I now turn to notions of addiction and the attention economy, in examining how the production of captivated subjects (Ash 2013) is instructive of structural and symbolic violence.

9.3 “Addiction” and The Attention Economy of Videogaming

Wes: *Yeah I definitely, definitely think they're addictive. And I don't know whether-addictive is a tough one, because, like I know I'd say from memory like I played most in Year 8 and I used to play like as soon as I got home until I went to sleep for maybe like, at least like six months, where I'd just play it for every second of every day. I think it was like Modern Warfare 2 at the time. Um, but like I couldn't, I couldn't really remember whether like I needed to play or- the reason I remember playing so much is because I was really good friends with these two guys and they both got girlfriends and then they'd like stop doing anything so I'd have like nothing else to do. So I'd play again so much, and then, like at the end of that six months I got in with a different friend group and I probably played a bit less. But I think the big thing is that, like time just flies when you're playing games so, you know it's, it saying you played have you know, on a video game for four hours to me is like it seems like the same time as watching, a one hour Netflix series or something it just like goes once you tune in. And I think that probably plays a part in the sense that, looking from outside someone who spends a lot of time doing it might be addicted, but it- yeah it does time, just, just, flies- In a good way- I think it's like a good way to get away from anything else you might be thinking of, or any other issues you've got going on at the time.*

Interviewer: *Yeah it's actually- so you would say it's more positive in that it's more of an escapist type thing?*

Wes: *Yeah but, same with everything in moderation. Like it, you know I think it's a- I really do think video games are such a good thing, like in moderation. The sense that*

the social side you can you know, play with your friends, without having to you know go and spend money or go out or you know and even people with like, accessibility or disabilities, they can like almost live a different life through these things, and you know do things with friends, they wouldn't be able to. But again in moderation, like you want to have the balance of you know, a real social life, as well as that kind of video game one.

Interviewees also offered nuanced, complex views over the addictive qualities of (Battle Royale) videogames, in discussing the time they had spent playing as part of their routines throughout the life course, therefore highlighting the ambiguous nature of (their) play. This is demonstrated by Wes who discusses how the time he spent playing depended on other social factors. He describes the feeling of how time “flies away” while playing - an affect of captivation (Ash 2013) - and so can act as an escape from the issues of everyday life. Moreover, while reflecting on some of the positive social aspects of such games, Wes distinguishes gaming as a social activity from “a real social life” and calls for a need for moderation, suggesting that there is tension between the two. Subsequently, Wes further exemplifies how players have various complicated and sometimes antagonistic entanglements with videogaming - while also further demonstrating the fluid identity of ‘the gamer’ and the ambiguous nature of these videogames in terms of their immersive qualities. This is why it is important to engage with young people as active agents to understand the ways in which these videogames have become deeply entangled and embedded in their everyday life.

Poppy: *Um so, apart from anything else, it's enjoyable to play obviously it's you know, you're not going to keep- it's gonna be harder to keep wanting to do something that you're not enjoying. So it's enjoyable to play. It's really easy. Its quick, you know the game doesn't have to take up a lot of time and if you do die you go straight back into a new game, It's really, um, like I don't know what the word is, like renewable experience, I guess. Um and as long as you're happy to keep playing the game will keep, giving you that experience you know. So, yeah like I say when we first started playing it, um- because I personally, like I'm happy to admit I do have quite an addictive personality, you know if I find a new game or I'm doing something I get really into it. Um and when we first started playing Fortnite, I used to um [laugh] this is going to sound really lame,*

but I used to have this notebook- This is when we would sit and play for like 10 hours- and I would write all of the challenges- It was structured a bit differently back that about how you would get XP- But I would write all the different challenges and collectibles down in front of me, so that when I was playing I didn't even have to like switch men- to the menu to see it and scroll through them, everything was in front of me. So that if we got to a certain location, I'd be like "Right okay here we need to do this, this and this" and we would literally just fucking grind through, to get the challenges, because then it was like "Yes!" Like you know [laughing] So yes, I would say that this, that's one of the things that makes it addictive.

In a slightly more positive vein, Poppy discusses how she became emotionally invested in playing *Fortnite*, by working through the challenges and finding all collectibles, as despite recognising this as a "grind" the sense of achievement led them to keep playing, thus emphasising how these games produce a 'retention economy' (Ash 2013; Shaw and Warf 2009). This practice of grinding also speaks to how videogaming as a mundane, ordinary activity has taken on work-like qualities (Gosling and Crawford 2011), and therefore exemplifies the increasingly blurry lines between work and play as these games have become embedded in everyday life (Yee 2006). Pertinently, it shows how the playing of Battle Royale videogames can produce "Empire"'s vital subjectivity of the 'worker-consumer' (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009). Thus, Poppy further underscores the ambiguous nature of play, and how it can work to animate "Empire".

Elliot: *[...] I mean you read up online, but you know, like you say can it be true is the media taking advantage of these stories and saying... I mean eh they say now there's a couple of articles, you see now kids are spending up to 20 hours a week on video games and people in comments are going crazy thinking "20 hours a week? Oh My God" and then there's you know people our age who kind of think "20 hours, that's rookie numbers", you know.*

Elliot: *[...] At the minute like I say I look back and I used to game all the time, like ridiculous amounts of hours, and you know somehow still, you know graduate from uni and all that. Like I look back and wonder like how the hell did I do that? But um, at the*

minute now I look back and I think what is it in life, I still don't have or still haven't quite like, for example, you know I'd still love to learn how to you know, speak another language or, play a musical instrument or pick up more life skills as I go- even learn first aid- and I think, had I learned those skills before I picked up a controller would I have done that, or would I have not have. Is it only now that I'm realizing that wait a minute, maybe I'm putting too much of my life into this sort of, um, scheme where I'm just pumping dopamine all the time, but not really receiving any life skills from it, you know.

Further emphasising the complexity of these games' addictive qualities and young gamer's subjectivities, Elliot critiques the media for exaggerating the effects of playing them for long periods of time, while also showing regret that he did not use this time to instead learn other life skills or engage in other social activities. In doing so, he points to non-instrumental perspectives on gaming and play where it is seen as irrational and wasteful (see Woodyer 2012). Instead, he talks about how they simply play for personal pleasure, considering these games as a type of drug or stimulant in terms of how they "pump dopamine". Altogether then, Elliot illustrates the ways in which players can have a complex and sometimes-contradictory relationship with videogaming, due to its addictive qualities. This then again points to the ambiguous nature of videogames in everyday life, as the affects of these ludic assemblages are indeterminate on the human body (Woodyer and Carter 2020). To be more precise here, whether these affects can be labelled as therapeutic or addictive depends on the dispositions of individuals, thus showing why there is a need to foreground young people's voices to better understand how videogames produce captivated subjects (Ash 2013).

Johnny: *I think, even from my own experience, I think they are addictive, and it- We talk about gambling, we talk about smoking, drinking, whatever else and yeah the humungous health, you know, issues. But I think it's, it's something that's recognized, but not much is done about it because, you know, I look at it and younger people are spending eight hours a day on it and it's like well hang on how are you getting your- And we know that screen addiction is bad for your eyes, bad for your head, bad for, well it's obviously bad for your body, because your sat in one place for x amount of time. But I know from over the pandemic that I was, I was thinking, waiting, "When am I next going on to the Xbox?", "When can I next go on the Xbox?" even though I only*

played a couple of hours a day. So I can't imagine what it's like if you spend your weekend, eight hours a day on it in a darkened room... And you know I think there is a little bit more that needs to be done and recognized around it. Umm, you know you, you see, in the news in the media again bringing it back to the football and whatever that they're thinking of taking gambling sponsors away, and I think that's a very important move. But we all know about gambling, we all know people are going to carry on gambling, but it's that little move that will hopefully give you know even 5 or 10% of people the chance to get away from it that'll make a difference. That um, if we stop you know... Advice, well- I don't know, I don't how to word it. If we stopped you know if we educate the young, you know younger people and even people our age that you know, eight hours a day in one place isn't great, you know.

Several interviewees also compared gaming addiction with other addictions, including smoking, drinking, gambling and porn in terms of its negative effects/affects on players. For instance, Johnny argues that there is need to educate and advise young people on the health risks that may result from excessive amounts of time spent videogaming. In doing so, he underscores the negative bodily affects that may emerge through the 'retention economy' that such games produce in creating captivated subjects, or in other words the somatic violence that emerges through "Empire" in its production of the subjectivity of the 'worker-consumer' (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009). Moreover, in outlining his own experience as a captivated subject during the pandemic, Johnny supports discourses of young people being simultaneously 'risky and at risk' (Hörschelmann and Colls 2010). He shows then why it is important to listen to young people's voices and experiences to gain insights into the complex, indefinite relations between risk, addiction and play, and whether such risks are socially constructed or may in fact be real. Strikingly, here Johnny – who as discussed in the last chapter is very politically engaged - also compares the need to manage these addictive qualities with measures made around gambling regulations being made in football. These relations between gaming/play and addiction will be expanded on in the remainder of this chapter.

9.3.1 Addiction and Micro-Transactions

Elliot: *So it's, it's one of those things I feel that's totally exaggerated by the media. Yes it is a problem, but like anything else there will always be that very small percentage of a problem. It's not going to be something that's a widespread you know, like "oh he's-not every kid can play Fortnite now because they're all out with shotguns shooting each other". Bullshit you know, it's just ridiculous it really is. It's such an exaggerated thing in the media and, quite frankly, when you always see that stuff in articles or whatever it's just kind of like you just can't help roll your eyes now because it's like "are we still doing this?" you know. It's just ridiculous. Let's focus on things that do matter, like addictiveness and video games and the fact that micro-transactions now, are completely, you know, in the norm now. Kids are actually using their parents' credit cards and stuff like that to buy skins- I mean what the fuck- I mean that it's all cosmetic it doesn't benefit them in gameplay whatsoever. It's, I think it's the fact that gambling also plays a huge part in that for sure, um, but I mean that's just my perspective in the moment I suppose.*

Like several interviewees, Elliot argues that the addictiveness of videogames should be more of a concern than their violent qualities, again being highly critical of the moral panics that emerge over the violent content in these games. Instead, he contends that greater attention should be paid to the normalisation of micro-transactions - the purchasing of virtual goods through micropayments - within the game industry, strongly condemning their exploitative qualities and pertinently here comparing micro-transactions to gambling. Elliot here specifically refers to 'loot boxes', a consumable digital item that players buy and redeem to receive a randomised selection of further virtual items. These range from simple customisation options for a player's avatar or character - such as the 'skins' discussed in the previous chapter - to game-changing equipment, like weapons and armour. Scholars have identified 'loot boxes' as being emblematic of the ongoing gamblification of digital play, being used in the gaming industry as another way for developers to monetise videogames as a product (Johnson and Brock 2020). While 'loot boxes' cannot be bought for real-life money in a few countries, such as Belgium for violating gambling regulations (Gerken 2018), there are currently no specific regulations that govern these chance-based mechanisms in digital games in the UK, meaning that they can be accessed by children and young people (as well as other vulnerable consumers). As I argue here, this gambling can also be thought of as a form of systemic or structural violence. As Waitt et al. (2022) explain, according to a Marxist perspective, the

gambling industry perpetuates capitalist injustice as it accumulates profit through dispossession from the poorest and not the production of surplus value. Thus, I reason these processes can be seen as a further extension of increasingly exploitative, neo-liberal processes of “‘Empire’” and its production of the subjectivity of the worker-consumer, as gambling becomes a facet of ludocapitalism (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009) – an idea I consider further in the next section.

Elliot: *-But yeah, I think, maybe, when I look back at games like Modern Warfare 2, you know, everyone was obsessed over things like camouflage skins and um, things like that for their guns. And these were, these were ways that you had to earn them in game, so there were there were far more fun, in my opinion, to earn rather, than just to buy, um. But you know, kids now may see that as well, even I want this particular skin I'm going to buy it, you know. And that's sort of the, the evolving change of it. So like you know some kid could like look at me and think like “earn them, no why just buy them?” Whereas I could say “Why buy them when you could just earn them?” and that's way more fun. It's one of those things that it's always going to be that evolving thing in video games that you may not be... I mean God, it might not even be earning them, it might not even be buying them anymore, it can be something way more drastic and sort of just grey area, but to the point where it's barely legal and the fact that they're still pumping out these games like that. Um, it's something that I heavily disagree with cosmetically if you want a skin, if you want to look like a total prick and games knowing everyone else, knowing that you spent at least 30 pound on this vehicle set or this weapon set just to look bright pink among the other people who are wearing like camouflage and look actually like they're in the game, or something I'd say “Go for it but bear it in mind, you know that's 30 pounds, you could have spent on bills, or you could have put in savings, put toward a holiday, anything”-*

Elliot continues by pointing out the differences between older and current generations of gamers, here arguing that virtual items such as ‘skins’ should be earned through playing and further questioning the legality of these modes of game monetisation. Furthermore, he highlights how obtaining such virtual goods, like for example a bright pink gun ‘skin’, do not carry social currency for him. This then suggests that while these games remain socially

embedded in young people's lives throughout their life course, over time they carry less symbolic power in part due to their aesthetic qualities but also their 'real' economic costs. Thus, it has two important implications for considering the affective dimensions of these emergent ludocapitalistic assemblages, as a) (symbolic) power is produced through assemblage, and b) it is socially differentiated in its affects according to age and other axes of social difference.

Elliot: *-You know, it's, it's things like that I feel people have no control over now because it's like totally only 30 pound, it's a bunch of fun I play the game enough to justify spending the money yeah why know this will be fun. And then, meanwhile, you know they're in debt at the moment, or that behind on car payments anything like that I guess it's just stupid, you know, they could have put the money toward food extra food shopping, you know. So yeah I think it's a problem. Um, whether people treat it, as a problem I, I don't know, I think that's more of a concern than violence for sure.*

Elliot surmises that the micro-commodification/gamblification of videogames (and earlier addiction) are more significant issues than their violent content. Yet, it is useful here in thinking about these processes again as in fact perpetuating other forms of violence. In particular, the buying of digital items like 'skins' enables individuals to build up social capital, as only those from wealthier backgrounds, i.e. those with higher economic capital, may be able to afford popular skins. Indeed, as Ash et al. (2022) write in their report on paid reward systems in digital games, these games have significant social currency and are socially embedded in children and young people's everyday practices and routines outside of school. As they explain, there is a perceived pressure to purchase cosmetic items and gameplay enhancements to bond and compete with friends and maintain these social relationships. This is because the aesthetics of their character and/or weapon(s) are highly valued as they signify the player's skill level and experience, and/or act as an extension of their identity. Subsequently, I contend that paid reward systems in videogames could also be considered as (re)producing symbolic violence, especially those associated with disparities in class, since young people and children from wealthier backgrounds can better afford the digital items that give them cultural capital and thus symbolic power within these digital spaces. This is especially important when considering the precarious and insecure lives of many British children and young people as a result of austerity measures (see for example McDowell et al. 2021), and so I argue that the

monetisation of these games exacerbates the structural violence that conditions their everyday lives.

Wes: *Yeah definitely, like so many of my friends as soon as the game comes out they'll like put in 60 quid just to get like a better team. And I don't know. I never really liked that pay to win kind of aspect of it. You know it's different if it is like I said a cosmetic thing where it's just a personalisation. But, if it's giving you some kind of advantage than the games almost you know saying, "The more you spend the more you'll win", and I think that's when it gets a bit dodgy. Even more so if it is like, uh, like FIFA where it's you know, the more you spend your gambling, although the more you gamble the more you'll win.*

In a similar vein to Elliot, Wes is also largely against the introduction of micro-transactions in videogames - except for virtual items like cosmetics which do not give people an advantage in gameplay - since for him the competitive aspect of these games is important. Indeed, it is important to remember both military-themed first-person shooters and sports games, like FIFA, in which you embody the "man of action" appeal to the predominant demographic of young white males, i.e. the masculine "hard-core" gamer (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009). This is suggestive of the persistent contradictions of digital play in animating this hyper-capitalist phase of "Empire" (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2021), as the micro-commodification of gaming for the accumulation of global capital causes further social ruptures within the gaming scene for undermining the long-standing, masculine notion of (fair) competition. While again, Wes draws attention to how the micro-commodification and gambification of such games as part of an incredibly exploitative, service-based model enacts somatic violence by encouraging addictive, problematic behaviours for those desperate to win, thus showing how "Empire" is productive of a multiplicity of violences within everyday life.

Poppy: *Yeah definitely. And the dances and TikTok has been a huge, a huge thing, um, because it's not just about- In the same way that, you know a Spiderman skin is going to be really popular because there's a new Spiderman movie. Um, a dance emote is going to be really popular because at the minute that's what's trending on TikTok. I*

mean it's really clever it's a complete abuse of, children and like manipulating their- you know selling to them, but it's clever yeah.

Poppy, who like the others is critical of micro-transactions, discusses the role of social media, specifically the short-form video hosting service TikTok, and the collaborations that *Fortnite* has with entertainment companies such as Marvel - where they sell 'skins' and weapons related to the franchise, infamously Thanos and the Infinity Gauntlet - thereby creating demand for micro-transactions to buy these popular virtual items. Moreover, Poppy also recognises how these in doing so these micro-transactions are equally exploitative and productive of symbolic power, as children will want to buy these virtual items for their social capital. This is a further development of how cultural properties, titles and themes are traded between cinema, comics and video games as part of a convergent entertainment complex (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009: xvi). Significantly, as Poppy points out, the Marvel comic book character Spiderman - who has since featured in several films including those in the Marvel Cinematic Universe and Sony's Spider-Man Universe – has become a 'skin' in *Fortnite*. This demonstrates both the commodification of popular culture under neo-liberal processes inherent to the 'experience economy' in a much broader ludocapitalistic media assemblage that pervades the everyday lives of children and young people (Ash 2013; Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009; Shaw and Warf 2009). Thus, I argue that this wider assemblage of popular culture should in turn be understood as an increasingly integral apparatus of "Empire" in exploring the multiple, emergent forms of (ludic) violence that emerge through various videogames, rather than just the representations of ludic war depicted in military-themed shooter games. Indeed, a greater focus on how Battle Royale videogames like *Fortnite* act as "advertising expos for (cultural) commodities of all kinds" (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2021: 374-375) would allow for a greater understanding of contemporary processes of "Empire" and the ways in which these new, cultural landscapes of the world market provide capital with potentials on a vast scale. This intensifying commodification of culture can also be seen in processes around the gamblification of Twitch streams, as I come to in the final section of this chapter.

9.3.2 Twitch, Gambling and the Attention Economy



Figure 40: Screenshot of an advert for the Huawei MateView GT 34 monitor in a Twitch stream of *Call of Duty: Warzone*.

As shown in *Figure 40*, and as outlined in Chapter 5, one mode of monetising Twitch streams is through advertisements as once they reach Affiliate or Partner level on Twitch, content creators can receive revenue from running adverts on their channel (Johnson and Woodcock 2019a). These adverts are mainly related to the gaming and technology industry, with adverts for companies and games such as Huawei, Red Bull, Visa, *Far Cry 6*, *FIFA 22* and PaddyPower. As I argued in the previous chapter, these adverts are emblematic of “Empire”, in terms of how they are an extension of processes of ludocapitalism and how they appeal to the white, young males who largely comprise the hyper-masculine technoculture of the gaming community. For example, as shown in *Figure 40*, and as detailed more in Chapter 7, adverts for gaming peripherals like the Huawei MateView GT 34 monitor work to materialise the white male gamer identity through discursively constructing a certain model of masculinity substantiated on war, mastery over the game and obtaining unfair advantages (Srauy and Palmer-Mehta 2018). Similarly, adverts for action games like *Far Cry 6* and sports games like *FIFA 22* in which the gamer embodies subjectivity of ‘the man of action’ in competing and/or fighting against other gamers, illustrates how Twitch as a platform - like consoles - is configured towards and reproductive of hyper-masculine “hard-core” subjects (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009). However, it is significant how some of these adverts are for gambling companies like PaddyPower, especially in considering the long-established relationship between gambling and gaming, with one of the first play theorists Roger Caillois (1961) identifying gambling activities

as games of chance. Nonetheless, as discussed earlier in this chapter, the distinction between gambling and gaming activities has become increasingly blurred, as digital technology has enabled the gamblification of digital games, such as through 'loot boxes'. And as I write here, it also vital to recognise how this process of gamblification extends to engagement mechanisms on Twitch, with streamers for example incorporating chance-based elements and unpredictable rewards to encourage fan engagement and generate further income (Abarbanel and Johnson 2020).

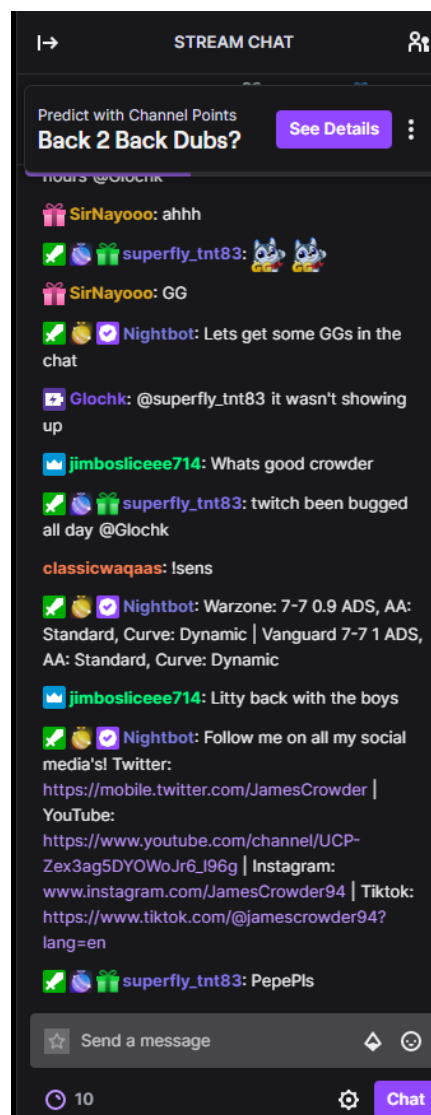


Figure 41: A screenshot of a chat window of a Twitch stream, in which viewers can predict whether the streamer will win a second game in a row using channel points.

An example of these mechanisms can be seen in *Figure 41*, where viewers have the option to gamble channel points over whether the streamer will win the next match of *Call of Duty: Warzone*. There are multiple ways of earning channel points, chiefly watching, following and participating in ‘raids’⁸ but also through ‘cheering’ and gifting a subscription (see Chapter 5). Additionally, there is also multiplier system for watching based on the viewer’s subscription tier (1.2x for Tier 1, 1.4x at Tier 2 and 2x at Tier 3) (Twitch 2023). These channel points can be used on channel rewards that the creator has enabled or added themselves such as emotes. Thus, in an extension of processes relating to the ‘attention economy’ produced through these games, these streams work to produce captivated subjects or the subjectivity of the ‘worker-consumer’ by offering viewers rewards for watching or ‘grinding’ for long periods of time. Furthermore, just as virtual currency masks the costs of micro-transactions and thus distances the players from how much they may actually be spending (Ash et al. 2022), these channel points disguise how much viewers may actually be donating to streamers as these channel rewards may not match their ‘real’ monetary value. This again is illustrative of the blurring distinctions between play, gaming and gambling through these ludic assemblages that are co-constituted through broader, neo-liberal processes. Indeed, as noted previously, streaming involves appropriating hegemonic, subordinate and counterhegemonic formations of masculinity for the purpose of competitive effectivity and marketability, in effect combining to produce a neoliberal form of masculinity (Vorhees and Orlando 2018). Significantly however, these gambling mechanisms within these ludic assemblage also work to further configure viewers as neo-liberal subjects. To elucidate, here I suggest that they can compared to young men’s sports betting assemblages in terms of how they work to reproduce hegemonic constructions of masculinity and homosociality, as the neo-liberal subjectivity of the recreational gambler is constructed in association with notions of risk, strength and ‘mateship’ (Waitt et al. 2022) - one that aligns with that of the hyper-masculine, ‘hard-core’ gamer. Likewise, in a similar vein to paid reward systems in videogames, these mechanisms for earning channel points in streams (re)produce the symbolic violence of class hierarchies. Specifically, those from wealthier backgrounds can more easily exchange economic capital for social capital and thus symbolic power within these digital spaces as they build stronger para-social bonds

⁸ A function through which streamers can send viewers over to another channel after a stream, and in turn make connections and network with other broadcasters in sharing and growing each other’s audiences

with the streamer. Thus, like the immaterial labour of streaming, I contend that the consumptive practice of spectating itself becomes another mode of productivity and exploitability for “Empire” and its violent, biopolitical regime (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009; 2021). In short, these blurred lines between both play and work and gaming and gambling are indicative of how Twitch streams as digital landscapes of the world market provide capital with unprecedented potentials and enable new modes of capitalist domination, and showing how digital play is co-constitutive of a triumphant, unrestrained “Empire” .

As a consequence of this convergence between gaming and gambling, there is also an increasingly popular genre of Twitch streams based on gambling, where prominent gaming streamers are now also gambling on virtual slot machines (Elad 2023). Yet, in 2022 Twitch announced a partial gambling ban that has targeted these same slots, roulette and dice games by barring videos of gambling sites not licensed in the US or "other jurisdictions that provide sufficient consumer protection" (Gerken 2022). Thus, just like other ‘risks’, gambling due its potential harms for young people, children and vulnerable adults has become increasingly regulated, thereby disrupting the (re)production of this emergent, risk-taking, neoliberal masculinity. In other words, akin to how the wider regulation of children’s play in public spaces is in conflict with processes of militarisation through militainment in the gaming café (see Chapter 5), here these regulations are in opposition to processes of ludocapitalism and the gamblification of gaming. These inherent tensions then are instructive of the puissance or excessive power of these ludic assemblages (Dittmer 2017) as in working to reproduce “Empire”’s vital subjectivities of the ‘soldier-citizen’ and ‘worker-consumer’ (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009) these processes come into conflict with the biopolitical regulation of children’s wellbeing. Thus, despite how “Empire” in this hyper-capitalist phase is increasingly unbounded in many ways, especially in digital spaces, the paradoxes and discontinuities inherent to its imperial, biopolitical regime still exist, and I argue must be seized upon by scholars to resist “Empire”. As such, this illustrates the need for further scholarly engagement with Twitch as a social, cultural and economic platform, in terms of how the site enables the production of what can be labelled as stream gambling assemblages. While more broadly speaking, and as I have sought to demonstrate here, there needs to be greater engagement with young gamers’, streamers’ and spectators’ voices, practices, geographies and experiences to gain ‘grounded’ insights into how they experience and negotiate these new modes of hyper-

capitalist domination the effects/affects of that on their everyday lives. This is especially true if we are to gain a greater understanding of the multiple, 'violent' but often contradictory ways in which young people are (potentially) made to be simultaneously 'at risk/risky' through these ludic assemblages in embodying "Empire"'s twin subjectivities of the 'soldier-citizen' and 'worker-consumer'.

9.4 Concluding Remarks

This chapter has attended to ways in which young people through their life course have encountered, negotiated and reflected on the violent and addictive qualities of videogames. To begin with, I overviewed the literature on risk, violence and young people's play, before engaging with young people's nuanced, critical views on the affects of, and moral panics centred on, the violent content in these games, with an emphasis on the ambiguous natures of play and violence and the relations between them. This chapter then discussed the fine lines between the addictive, escapist and therapeutic aspects of video games and the indeterminate affects of these ludic assemblages on young people's bodies, illustrating again the ambiguity of play in engaging with these games as instruments of the retention economy. Following this notion of addiction, I thus turned to the increasing micro-commodification and gamblification of videogaming, illuminating how videogames can contribute to the symbolic and structural violence that conditions young gamers' everyday lives. Finally, in again turning to Twitch streams, I analysed how streamers employed gambling (mechanisms) as a way to further monetise their immaterial playbour, which I argue reproduced a risk-taking, neoliberal masculine subjectivity of the gambler/gamer-consumer. As such, I have shed light on the various ways in which everyday practices of playing, spectating and streaming (Battle Royale) videogames work to produce "Empire"'s vital subjectivity of the 'worker-consumer', and how this is indicative of new phase of hyper-capitalist domination. Ultimately, in recognising how the ludic assemblages (Battle Royale) videogames and Twitch streams that emerge in young people's everyday lives are also shaped through processes of ludocapitalism, I highlighted the need to look at the wider, heterogeneous relations that make up ludic war, to analyse the many 'risks' and violence(s) that are inherent to this medium as a form of both militainment and ludocapitalism.

Chapter 10: Conclusion

In this concluding chapter, I begin by synthesising the arguments laid out in the previous chapters through presenting a summary of my main research findings. I frame this according to the central research questions and corresponding research aims that drove the thesis, as originally set out in Chapter 1. Here I discuss how my research has both engaged with and extended on existing theoretical, empirical and methodological work, elucidating my contributions to knowledge. Specifically, I position my conclusions within wider debates on violence, assemblage and play in critical geopolitics and related bodies of scholarship, and attend again to notions of “Empire” and the multitude. Furthermore, I evaluate assemblage ethnography as a methodological approach towards researching - and potentially intervening in - the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and streams that emerge in young people’s everyday lives. Finally, I highlight some directions for future research, both conceptual and methodological in nature, to gain greater insights into the themes I have raised throughout the thesis.

10.1 Thesis Summary

This thesis has extended work in popular geopolitics and related fields on the relations between ambiguous notions of geopolitics, violence and play that emerge in everyday practices of videogaming, in attending to how Battle Royale videogames like *Call of Duty: Warzone* and livestreams of these games are paradigmatic of “Empire” (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009). Here I have contended that most prior research on ludic war within military-themed videogames has stressed the effects of digital military violence in relation to the MIME-complex and processes of militarisation, without paying much attention to the everyday context of their play. As such, this scholarship has failed to recognise the ways in which the medium is productive of a multiplicity of violence(s) that are inherent to “Empire” and configure everyday life. Subsequently, I proposed how assemblage ethnography (Ghoddousi and Page 2020) can enable greater insights into how young gamers and an array of actants, spaces and places are co-constitutive of the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and streams, and in turn “Empire”. This necessitated the use of various qualitative, ethnographic methods to explore how young gamers, here conceptualised as assemblages in and of themselves, make up these ludic assemblages, popular cultural assemblages and the

other geopolitical assemblages that co-constitute “Empire” and their everyday lives. In doing so, this thesis has moved away from the abstract, ‘textual’ focus of prior scholarship on how popular geopolitical discourse shapes the everyday, to instead provide grounded insights on the ways in which young people encounter, co-constitute and live geopolitics.

The following two chapters then mapped the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and streams within the context of young gamers’ everyday lives. In exploring the complex geographies of ludic war/violence, Chapter 5 outlined how the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and streams emerge through and bring together the spaces of the home, gaming café, Twitch stream and the internet. Firstly, this chapter recognised the space of the home as a site for geopolitical consumption and production, illuminating how domestic space becomes socially reconfigured for private practices of videogaming and intimate practices of streaming. Following this, I turned to the gaming café as a youth-oriented space for leisure play and socialising, underscoring how videogames have become embedded in everyday life as part of the urban landscape and cultural economy. Here I shed light on the ways in which the space of the gaming café is instructive of everyday geopolitical processes, such as in recognising how it enables practices of surveillance. Nonetheless, this chapter also highlighted how the gaming café as a regulated, ‘child-friendly’ space, illustrates tensions between processes around the militarisation of the space and the commodification of young people’s indoor play. Following this, I outlined how Twitch, as an interconnected, social media platform and digital interface facilitates streamers’ playbour, as an array of human and non-human actants, like the nightbot, enable and configure the emergent, ludic assemblages of Battle Royale streams. Lastly, I studied the material, affective and spatial qualities of the Internet and its significance in the territorialisation and deterritorialisation of these ludic assemblages, further emphasising how agency is distributed across constituent human and non-human actants. Thus, I illustrated the geographical extent of the biopolitical regime of “Empire”, and how as an assemblage, “Empire” is itself co-constitutive of a complex, fluid array of geographies.

Chapter 6 attended to the complex and multiple ways through which young gamers co-constitute, engage with and negotiate geopolitics in everyday life, in analysing the practices of

playing, streaming and spectating of Battle Royale videogames and streams. In examining how videogames and the gaming scene has continued to be a part of their life course, I argued that they should be understood in relation to the fluid and complex patterns of everyday life. Through an engagement with materialities and the body, I outlined how videogames are generative of embodied affects of immersion, playfulness and nostalgia, which in turn are instructive of the attention economy of videogaming and the (re)production of young gamers' subjectivities as long-term consumers. Moreover, this chapter has considered some of the ways in which young people have both actively and more passively engaged with videogames and the wider gaming scene, thus illustrating the fluid identity of 'the gamer'. After this, I then explored both the viewers and streamers of Battle Royale Twitch broadcasts, considering how they negotiate the social and affective dimensions of these assemblages. Here there were engagements with; a) how streaming enables the formation of para-social and often homo-social relations between viewers and streams; b) how it facilitates ludic collaboration as viewers seek to negotiate the affects of these games during their own videogaming; and c) how it highlights the neo-liberal discourses and social effects inherent to this immaterial playbour. As such, this chapter has foregrounded young people's voices and gained insights into the extent in which videogames have become embedded in their everyday lives, while also recognising how agency is distributed across the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and streams as young gamers, spectators and streamers negotiate their affects.

The next three chapters specifically engaged with the ways in which the complex, multi-dimensional and sometimes contradictory processes of militainment and ludocapitalism, in mapping how young gamers have been continually (re)configured according to "Empire"'s two vital subjectivities of the 'worker-consumer' and 'soldier-citizen' (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009). In Chapter 7, I concentrated on the humourous and toxic dimensions of these emergent, ludic assemblages, through an examination of the ways in which they are instructive of a hyper-masculine, militarised gaming technoculture and the production of "hard-core" subjects. After briefly reviewing the scholarship on humour and laughter within popular geopolitics, this chapter through a number of examples, has charted how a distinct 'stream-humour' becomes caught up with the affective labour of streamers in the formation of homosocial bonds with viewers. Nevertheless, in considering both ambiguous notions of toxicity and how social transgressions in ludic war are regulated through discourses of

domination, I turned to how the same assemblages are productive of, and transformed by, affects of toxicity. In particular, there was a focus on the policing of cheaters, grievers and hackers, as they become demarcated as ludic terrorists through practices of surveillance and ‘Othering’ that in turn reinforce hegemonic, racialised and gendered discourses of “Empire”. In doing so, this chapter emphasised the ways in which affects of toxicity and humour can resonate with and amplify each other throughout the event of the stream, such as in enactments of symbolic violence, therefore illustrating how both affects enable these homosocial, militaristic assemblages. Altogether then, in this chapter I illuminated how young people through embodying the subjectivity of the ‘soldier-citizen’ in their everyday practices of playing, streaming and spectating *Call of Duty: Warzone* and other Battle Royales have unconsciously or otherwise worked to animate “Empire”.

Chapter 8 discussed how young gamers think about, engage with and participate in politics in their everyday lives. To begin with, this chapter reviewed critical geopolitical and political geographical scholarship on children and young people, recognising a need to explore how their complex and at times ambiguous P/political agencies, subjectivities and dispositions are in part shaped through their interactions with videogames and a wider assemblage of popular culture. After this, I discussed several young gamers’ ambivalent but perceptive interpretations of hegemonic geopolitical imaginaries and military representations in Battle Royale videogames like *Call of Duty: Warzone* (e.g. Bos 2018a; Power 2007; Smicker 2010), here noting how these views are to some extent influenced through their interactions with friends and family. Following this, I focused on how young gamers can be seen as ambiguous political subjects in terms of how they engage with big ‘P’ politics in their everyday lives, and how this has been affected by intensifying ‘global’ media flows. In the penultimate section, I examined how young gamers engage with ‘small p’ politics through practices of videogaming, finding that they were largely accepting of progressive politics within gaming and in fact critical of the reactionary, misogynistic and racist elements of gaming culture (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2021). Finally, this chapter outlined how ludic assemblages of Twitch streams have been configured as ‘apolitical’ spaces or ‘magic circles’ by streamers, despite the various entanglements with processes of geopolitics, militarisation and neo-liberalism that are inherent to “Empire”. In doing so, I underscored the complexities and ambiguities of young gamers as political subjects, and how their subjectivities, engagements and views are mutually

shaped through intensifying 'global' flows of media and popular culture, as well as their social relations with friends, families and other groups.

Lastly, Chapter 9 has engaged with how young people through their life course have encountered, negotiated and reflected on the violent and addictive qualities of videogames. After critically reviewing the literature on risk, violence and young people's play, it has turned to how young people have challenged moral panics over the violent content in these games, offering nuanced views on their affects. The chapter then emphasised the indeterminate affects of these ludic assemblages on young gamers' bodies, in terms of their immersive, escapist and potentially addictive qualities, further illustrating the ambiguity of play in thinking about how these games work as instruments of the retention economy. Significantly, in considering addiction in relation to both the intensifying micro-commodification and gamblification of videogaming, I examined how the medium is instrumental to symbolic and structural violence that conditions young people's everyday lives. In the final section, I explored how as streamers have turned to gambling (mechanisms) in monetising their immaterial playbour, they thereby reaffirm a risk-taking, neoliberal masculine subjectivity of the gambler amalgamating that with the subjectivity of the 'worker-consumer'. In doing so, I have shed further light on the various ways in which everyday practices of playing, spectating and streaming (Battle Royale) videogames work to produce "Empire"'s vital subjectivity of the 'worker-consumer'. Ultimately, in charting how the ludic assemblages of (Battle Royale) videogames and Twitch streams that emerge in young people's everyday lives are co-constituted through processes of ludocapitalism, I argue that there is a need to both look at the wider relations within the MIME-complex and beyond just ludic war. Only then can we gain insights into the multiple 'risks' and violence(s) that are inherent to "Empire" in this new phase of hyper-capitalist domination.

10.2 Contributions to Knowledge

Overall, this thesis has made a series of conceptual, empirical and methodological contributions to knowledge. In undertaking assemblage ethnography to critically examine the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and streams in the context of young people's everyday lives, it has opened up a number of different research avenues and trajectories. In

following Dittmer (2015a), this thesis has been less concerned with a focus purely on Battle Royale videogames and streams as discrete ‘things’, but instead has looked at how these ludic assemblages have emerged in young people’s everyday lives in relation to broader popular cultural and geopolitical assemblages - including “Empire” itself. By doing so, this thesis has underscored how these ludic assemblages, young people and a range of actants, spaces and places have been mutually shaped through processes of both militainment and ludocapitalism. As such, I have argued that it is only through empirical, ‘grounded’ investigations into their complex, ambiguous nature in young people’s everyday lives - in particular the diverse, prosaic and vital practices of videogaming, streaming, spectating and cheating that have not been given much (if any) attention within geographical scholarship - that we can gain a greater understanding of the ways in which Battle Royale videogames and streams co-constitute everyday geopolitics.

This thesis makes a number of contributions to the field of popular geopolitics, human geography and other related disciplines, in having presented answers to a) two key research questions;

1. In what ways are young people who play, watch and broadcast *Call of Duty: Warzone* and other Battle Royale games and streams co-constitutive of ‘everyday’ geopolitics?
2. How do young people’s engagements with the ludic assemblages of *Call of Duty: Warzone* and other Battle Royale games and streams, shape their everyday lives?

And b) three corresponding research aims;

- I. Attend to how young people engage with geopolitics in the co-constitution of the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and streams
- II. Engage with young people to identify what are the social effects of being involved in these ludic assemblages, and explore how they negotiate these processes in their everyday lives.
- III. Develop and evaluate a methodological approach towards doing ludic assemblage that is open to the ambiguity of play and enables playful engagements with the potentialities of the liminal, experimental space-times of Battle Royale videogames and streams.

In examining the everyday ways in which young people are co-constitutive of the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and streams and thus geopolitics, this thesis has built on previous literature looking at the economic or political dimensions of videogames, illustrating how this genre of games is instructive of both militainment and ludocapitalism. In particular it has turned to how these ludic assemblages have led to the reproduction of hegemonic discourses of a hyper-masculine gaming technoculture as young players, viewers and streamers become “hard-core” subjects and subsequently embody “Empire”’s twin subjectivities of the ‘worker-consumer’ and ‘citizen-soldier’. For instance, in exploring how young people act as ‘worker-consumers’ I focused on a range of everyday practices from the work-like elements of videogaming, such as ‘grinding’ to upgrade characters and gain virtual items like ‘skins’, to the affective ‘playbour’ of streamers themselves as they look to monetise their content. Moreover, I have argued that the utilisation of gambling mechanisms in both videogaming and Twitch streams has enabled further modes of productivity and exploitability for “Empire” and its biopolitical regime (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009; 2021) in configuring players and viewers according to the neo-liberal subjectivities of the gambler and ‘worker-consumer’. While in analysing how young gamers embody the militarised, masculine subjectivity of the ‘soldier-civilian’, it has explored how streamers personify the symbol of the heroic soldier in winning Battle Royales and defeating ‘weak’, enemy players and ‘ludic terrorists’. Thus, in shedding light on how affects of humour and toxicity within the emergent ludic assemblages can resonate to reproduce the discourses of domination that code this hyper-masculine, gaming technoculture, it has highlighted how future work in ludic geopolitics needs to further consider regressive potentials of play for reproducing hegemonic geopolitical discourses. While it has also underscored how streamers of Battle Royale videogames as geopolitical subjects, embody a hybrid, hegemonic, neo-liberal form of masculinity, one that is instructive of how processes, practices and discourses of ludocapitalism and militainment now further intertwine to co-constitute “Empire” in this new phase of hyper-capitalist domination (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009, 2020).

At the same time, this thesis has also recognised how the multitudinous potential of these ludic assemblages is co-productive of toxicity through how it has also enabled the nomadic subjectivity of what I termed the ‘ludic terrorist’, one who through ‘deviant’ practices of

hacking, cheating and/or 'griefing' destabilises "Empire", which streamers in turn police against through both surveillant and toxic practices. As such, I illuminated how the multitude oscillates between subversion and submission to "Empire" through ludic assemblage, as streamers use their own technological aptitude and cultural knowledge they have developed through play against these 'ludic terrorists' (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009). Yet, this thesis has also shown how in engaging in their own toxic behaviours that dehumanise, effeminise and racialise 'ludic terrorists', young gamers can reaffirm discourses of domination and hegemonic geopolitical discourse, where derogatory language is deemed a tolerated social transgression and slurs are made meaningless, engendering those within these spaces as 'toxic' subjects. However, in attending to the ambiguous, complex and at times paradoxical political subjectivities that young gamers can embody, it has found through interviews that they are largely accepting of progressive politics within videogaming in contrast to some of the more toxic, reactionary elements of the gaming scene. Thus, to sum up, in embodying a multiplicity of (political) subjectivities within the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and streams, young gamers through everyday practices of playing, streaming, viewing and hacking co-constitute the geopolitical everyday as they both animate and destabilise "Empire".

In engaging with young people to better understand the social affects/effects of being entangled in these ludic assemblages, and in turn how they negotiate these processes in their everyday lives, this thesis has charted the multiple 'risks' and violences that (potentially) emerge through banal practices of playing, streaming and spectating of Battle Royale videogames and streams. Chiefly, I have demonstrated how young gamers have nuanced views of the social effects of digitally-mediated violence, thereby countering the simplistic 'moral panics' that have centred on the violent content in such games, as these games have become embedded - or rather 'domesticated' - through their time videogaming across their life course. Instead, I emphasised young gamers' concerns over the potentially addictive qualities of videogaming, or in other words, how as instruments of the retention economy, these games engender captivated subjects (Ash 2013). I argue that this process in turn can be thought of as a form of somatic violence that emerges through "Empire" in its production of the 'worker-consumer' (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009). In exploring the various social effects/affects of the ludic assemblages, I have stressed that these games are (re)productive of a multiplicity

of violences beyond just representations of spectacular war or digitally-mediated ludic violence. For instance, I elucidated how through both ‘humorous’ and ‘toxic’ practices, young gamers as ‘soldier-citizens’ may enact forms of symbolic violence through the ‘Othering’ of enemy players, as well as how as ‘worker-consumers’ they can perform symbolic violence in the purchasing of micro-transactions. Moreover, this thesis turned to how gamblification of gaming and streaming is (re)productive of both structural and symbolic violence in young people’s everyday lives. In doing so, it has shown how “Empire” works as a violent, biopolitical regime through both processes of militarisation and neo-liberalism, while also shedding light on the tensions between these processes and the wider regulation of ‘risky/at-risk’ children and young people, such as in the commodification of their indoor play and gambling restrictions. To recap then, in stressing the multiplicity of violence(s) that emerge through the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and streams enacted on and by young gamers, beyond just the playing of war, I documented the need to focus more broadly on how war as a social condition inherent to “Empire” shapes young people’s everyday lives.

Finally, this thesis has sought to construct and appraise a methodological approach towards doing ludic assemblage that is open to the ambiguous nature of play and allows for playful engagements with the potentialities of the liminal, experimental space-times of Battle Royale videogames and streams. Specifically, through employing the approach of assemblage ethnography (c.f. Ghoddousi and Page 2019) to research the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and streams, I have been able to demonstrate its methodological value for critical/popular geopolitical scholarship. Chiefly, I have shown how it allows for a foregrounding of young people’s voices, while also recognising how agency is distributed through ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and streams as young gamers, spectators and streamers negotiate their affects. In following the likes of Behrenshausen (2012) I have moved past simplistic, anthropogenic accounts of videogaming and recognised the agency of non-human elements, such as how the nightbot assists the streamer in their playbour, but can also act as a source of humour among viewers. Furthermore, in conceptualising young gamers themselves as assemblages co-constituted through these ludic assemblages, this thesis has highlighted both the ways in which practices of videogaming have helped shape players’ subjectivities and the ambiguous, indeterministic qualities of videogaming in terms of its affects on human bodies and the various second-bodies politic in

which they participate (Woodyer and Carter 2018). For instance, it has illustrated how young gamers had nuanced but contradictory views of the time-consuming, immersive qualities of these games in thinking of videogaming in relation to notions of escapism and addiction, thereby speaking to the excessive nature of play (Woodyer 2012). Likewise, it has sought to avoid romanticising young people's play(fulness) by shedding light on the ways in which toxic and humorous practices intersect in reproducing hegemonic discourse. In short, then doing assemblage ethnography with young gamers and the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and streams, has enabled a deeper understanding of the ambiguous nature of, and the relations between, play, violence and geopolitics, as well as the complex subjectivities of young gamers.

Overall, in this thesis I have made several arguments in contributing to our understanding of the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and streams, and the complex ways in which they have emerged through and shape young gamers' everyday practices and lives. Firstly, in developing this concept of the ludic assemblage and critically analysing the various actants, spaces and practices involved in their emergence, instead of simply examining these mediums as singular 'texts', I illustrated why as Dittmer (2016a) argues, scholars should explore popular culture as 'doings'. Studying the enlivening nature of these popular cultural assemblages offers greater insights into how geopolitics actually works in the context of young people's everyday lives. Likewise, in accounting for the multitudinous potential of these ludic assemblages I demonstrate how Battle Royale videogames and streams exemplify this new fractious, hyper-capitalist phase of "Empire". Secondly, I argued that future geographical scholarship should broaden its scope to not just engage with the militaristic aspects of these cultural mediums, i.e. examining these games as forms of militainment, but also attend to the economic dimensions of both videogames and live-streams as forms of ludocapitalism. Doing this enables a greater understanding of how these ludic assemblages as co-constituted through both geopolitical and neo-liberal processes inherent to "Empire", thereby enact other forms of prosaic violence on young people. Namely, here I draw attention to how the exploitative, addictive nature of micro-transactions exacerbates the biopolitical processes of structural and symbolic violence that condition young people's everyday lives under "Empire" in this new phase of hyper-capitalist domination. Thirdly, I have established the significance of Twitch streams as complex, digital spaces with their own sets of economic, cultural, political

and social geographies, with a particular focus on how they have become instructive to contemporary, ludocapitalistic processes of “Empire” as these new, digital landscapes of the world market provide capital with immeasurable potentials. As such, I add to the scant body of geographical work focusing on videogames and gaming culture, illustrating how our everyday lives are becoming increasingly digitally-mediated and in turn the need for scholarship to respond to this both empirically and methodologically. Equally, I add to our understanding of contemporary, hyper-capitalist processes of “Empire” in mapping these new, emerging digital spaces and elucidating how the biopolitical technologies of live-streaming work in producing the hegemonic, neo-liberal subjectivity embodied by streamers of Battle Royale videogames - a nascent, hybrid subjectivity that combines aspects of the ‘citizen-soldier’ and ‘worker-consumer’. Fourthly, I have identified a need to further explore the ‘dark side’ of play and humour through charting how young gamers reinforce dominant geopolitical discourses, logics and processes in reproducing a highly toxic and hyper-masculine gaming technoculture. In critically analysing the ambiguity of play and humour within these ludic assemblages, this thesis thus challenges prior work that has exaggerated the progressive potentials of play, while neglecting its regressive, problematic tendencies. This is especially important when considering how the intensifying social antagonisms within digital gaming culture may be indicative of both the victory and collapse of “Empire”. As such, I now close with some directions for further investigations into young gamers, ludic assemblages and “Empire”.

10.3 New Research ‘Lines of Flight’

To end, I wish to briefly refer to a few ways in which future scholarship within popular geopolitics and beyond, can build on the concepts, theories and methodological ideas that have been presented in this thesis - mainly here with a focus on Twitch streams. More generally, I reason there just needs to be more work done on young gamers and the spaces which they inhabit. This includes the digital spaces of other social media platforms like Twitter, Reddit and TikTok, as well as physical spaces like gaming cafes and event venues where e-sports tournaments take place and fell outside the scope of this thesis. As a practical and conceptual response to Covid-19 pandemic restrictions, I did not explore the ludic assemblages that emerge through e-sports competitions. Thus, there is fertile ground for geographers to contribute to existing work on competitive digital play within this hyper-

masculine gaming technoculture (see Taylor 2011) through a focus on the spatial and scalar dynamics of the resultant ludic assemblages. Moreover, such work could add to the research done here by studying the e-sports competitions of Battle Royale videogames like *Call of Duty: Warzone*, attending to how such tournaments (re)configure spectators and competitors alike according to “Empire”’s twin vital subjectivities of the ‘soldier-citizen’ and ‘worker-consumer’.

However, now I would like to propose the argument that there needs to be a focus on live-streaming services, primarily Twitch as the most popular website for these broadcasts, but also other similar platforms like YouTube Live and Facebook Watch. As discussed earlier in Chapter 4, these platforms can be understood as both a site for and a method of data collection in researching digital cultures and how assemblages of human and non-human actants co-constitute (gameplay) assemblages. To be precise, I likened Twitch stream ethnography to other online research methodologies such as virtual or internet ethnography (see Hine 2016) and digital ethnography (see Boellstorff et al. 2012) while also recognising its social, political and economic affordances as both a form of social media (Adams 2015) and a digital interface (Ash 2018) in studying the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and streams. Nonetheless, while the focus of this thesis has been primarily on streams of *Call of Duty: Warzone*, and secondarily on *Fortnite* and *Apex: Legends*, I maintain that there is a need to focus more broadly on Twitch as a live-streaming platform to better understand how it enables and supports new modalities of militainment and ludocapitalism. Here it is especially important to again recognise Amazon’s ownership of Twitch as an example of how digital play is deeply entangled in and shaped through a consolidating platform capitalism (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2020).

Nevertheless, again it should be emphasised that not only does Twitch play host to streams of a wide variety of videogames and/or broadcasts of e-sports competitions, but also music broadcasts, other forms of creative content and “in real life” streams. Therefore, future research could extend on Horton (2012), in providing greater insights into how Twitch as part of a wider assemblage of popular culture (Dittmer 2015a) shapes young people’s everyday geographies. For instance, there could be a further engagement with how Twitch is constitutive of social relations - such as those produced between the streamer(s) and viewer(s)

- and how it becomes intimately entangled in daily routines. As part of this work, there should also be a focus on both the big 'P' and small 'p' political aspects of Twitch as a social media platform, here accounting for the ways in which it structures communication, knowledge and political action (Adams 2016). For instance, I would like to draw attention to how the US Democratic Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez became one of the platform's biggest broadcasters with a peak of 435,000 viewers as she played the online multiplayer social deduction game *Among Us* with fellow Representative Ilhan Omar and well-known gaming streamers, in an attempt to encourage American viewers to vote in the 2020 presidential election (Kastrenakes 2020). As such, I reason that further analyses of the social and political affordances of Twitch could subsequently both bring together and enrich scholarship within critical geopolitics and digital geography.

Lastly, in thinking about methodological 'lines of flight', I would like to suggest that scholars interested in studying Twitch streams should consider conducting their own Twitch streams as part of a wider ethnographic approach towards doing (ludic) assemblage. As a method this would build on studies that have used digital technology in researching (game)play, such as Woodyer and Carter's (2018) work on children's war play in their own homes, Giddings' (2009) micro-ethological approach towards videogaming, Taylor's (2018) video ethnography of e-sports and Bos' (2016) use of video ethnography with participants playing *Call of Duty*. Furthermore, such a method would align with the ethos of experimentation that assemblage entails in attending to processes of agencement, placing it alongside methodological and presentational practices such as montage, performative methods, thick description and stories to attend to processes of agencement (Anderson and McFarlane 2011). Of course this comes with issues of recognising how Twitch streaming produces its own set of power relations between the researcher/streamer and spectators/participants. This is why carrying an auto-ethnographic sensibility is vital here, in ensuring that such work produces assemblages with progressive potentials, work that intervenes in these emergent, social-material-affective assemblages and uses their multitudinous potential to subvert "Empire" and bring about a post-capitalist future, rather than reinforces its regressive, neo-liberal tendencies (Kinkaid 2020). As such I recognise the precarious nature of research in the neo-liberal academy (see Mason and Megoran 2021) and compare it to the precarious, insecure labour of streaming, and how to follow Ghoddousi and Page (2020), the subsequent building of bonds of solidarity

and empathy could enable both further research and political action. In particular, I suggest that becoming embedded in these communities may make it easier to conduct research with other streamers - having noted my inability to recruit streamers as interview participants in Chapter 4 - as participating in their playbour as a team-mate in-game would be of benefit to both the streamer and researcher in their respective work. In addition, I maintain that employing such a method would also help in resolving the limitations of the written format of the thesis in (re)presenting research findings, where screenshots fail to encompass the full complexity and vitality of assemblages in action, such as in how they reproduce the ocular-centrism of critical geopolitics as a discipline in omitting sound (Grayson 2018). Therefore, employing Twitch streaming as a both a method and mode of presentation would give greater insights into the affective and multi-sensory qualities of these ludic assemblages, in further unpacking the ambiguous relations between play, geopolitics and violence in what could be considered a form of creative practice.

Ultimately, there are many theoretical, conceptual and methodological 'lines of flight' that can be taken from this assemblage ethnography of young gamers and the ludic assemblages of Battle Royale videogames and streams. The task now is for us academic "nomads" to work on, or perhaps I should say play with, the progressive, multitudinous potentials of the various social-material-affective assemblages that make up "Empire" to help bring about an alternative, post-capitalist future.

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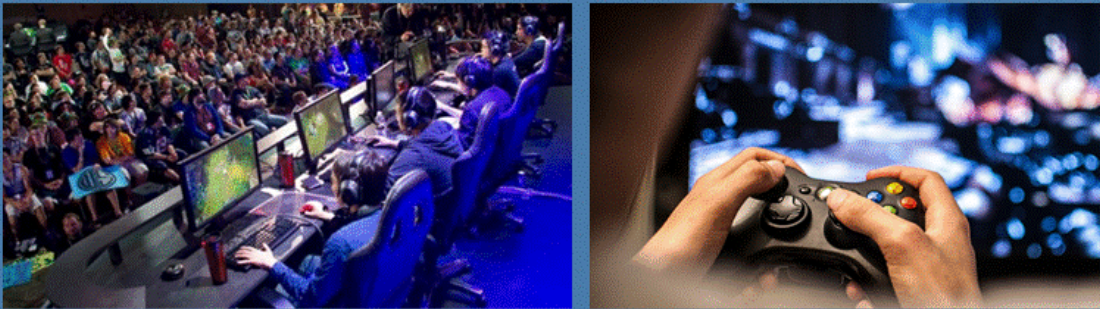
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Appendices

Appendix A: Recruitment Poster

CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS



FOR THE RESEARCH PROJECT: UNDERSTANDING VIOLENCE, POLITICS AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S PLAY IN BATTLE ROYALE VIDEOGAMES

My name is Tom Shrimplin and I am looking to talk to young people about videogames, the gaming community, and politics, as the Battle Royale genre of videogames becomes more prevalent in everyday life.



Please get in touch if you:

- Are over the age of 18, and consider yourself a young person/adult
- Live in the UK
- Play or have played Battle Royale videogames such as Call of Duty: Warzone **AND/OR** are involved in the gaming industry

You are invited to take part in an interview lasting up to an hour, and there may be opportunities for you to take part in further research activities associated with this project.

This project has ethical approval from Newcastle University, everything discussed will be made anonymous, and all research here will be conducted online.

Contact Tom at t.w.shrimplin1@newcastle.ac.uk for more info or to get involved.



Economic and Social Research Council

Appendix B: List of Interview Participants

No.	Name	Occupation	Age	Sex	Nationality	Ethnicity	Background/Information
1	Elliot	Retail	25	Male	British	White	Previously a "hard-core" gamer, but now more a casual player of videogames such as Call of Duty: Warzone and Halo.
2	Ben	Student and Working Full-Time	28	Male	British	White	Casual player of military-themed shooters. Degree in video game animation.
3	Harry	Student Journalist	24	Male	British	White	Casual player of various genres.
4	Johnny	Council Worker	28	Male	British	White	Casual player of games like Call of Duty: Warzone. Plays with younger cousin and others. Is interested in politics
5	Peter	Postgraduate Researcher	25	Male	British	White	Casual player of various genres. Plays Fortnite with his partner.
6	Wes	Civil Servant	27	Male	British	White	Casual player of games like Call of Duty: Warzone and FIFA.
7	Poppy	Team Leader at a Gaming Company	29	Female	British	White	Casual player. Plays Fortnite with her partner, and also with her nieces and nephews. Works for a games company.



Information Sheet for Interviews with Young People

Title of Study: Young people, violence, and the 'everyday' co-production of geopolitical discourse in *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds (PUBG)*

Invitation and Brief Summary

My name is Thomas William Shrimplin (Tom) and I am a PhD Geography student at Newcastle University. I am personally inviting you to take part in this study which is exploring how young people engage with videogames and the gaming community, as the Battle Royale genre of videogames like *PUBG* become more prevalent in everyday life. I have asked you as a young person who plays Battle Royale videogames to take part, because videogaming is a part of your daily life and generally speaking young people are less likely to be involved in politics in formal ways.

Please read the information here carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Participation is not compulsory so take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. If you do wish to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form. However, you are free to withdraw from the research at any time, without giving any reason and without any cost to yourself. If you choose to withdraw from the study, any data collected from you will not be used and will be deleted.

What does taking part involve?

Taking part involves an interview which will last approximately one hour. It will be done in an informal, conversational style, recorded, and conducted online through Zoom. In this interview we will talk about:

- The role that videogames like *PUBG*, play in your everyday life.
- Your experiences, thoughts and feelings around videogames, their politics, and how they are reported on in the media.

- The social aspects of videogaming and of being involved in the wider gaming community.

All information that is shared will be done so in confidence and you will be anonymised through the use of a pseudonym. The files from this interview will be transferred to my account on a university issued computer at the earliest opportunity. All documents containing data relating to this interview will also be encrypted, password protected and stored on my account, so that they can only be accessed by me.

This study will involve taking some of your time and may involve discussing sensitive issues around racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of discrimination in gaming communities. This study will also be of no individual benefit to you, but I hope that your participation will help make clear the role that videogames play in many young people's lives and the political and social aspects of videogaming.

As this research is part of a postgraduate geography PhD project, the results may appear in publications and reports. If you wish to be provided with a copy or summary of the thesis as well as other publications, please leave your contact details and I will forward them to you. If you feel that there is something wrong or if you have any additional questions, then please contact my supervisor.

This study has been approved by the Newcastle University Research Ethics Committee.

Thank you for reading this information. Contact details are down below.

Contact Information

Researcher: Thomas William Shrimplin: +44 7949657820 / t.w.shrimplin1@newcastle.ac.uk

Supervisor: Dr. Alison Williams: +44 1912086439 / alison.williams1@ncl.ac.uk



NEWCASTLE UNIVERSITY
Geography, Sociology and Politics

Name: Thomas William Shrimplin

Title of study: Young people, violence and the 'everyday' co-production of geopolitical discourse in *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds (PUBG)*

Young People Interview Consent Form

Thank you for showing interest in this study. I will send an information sheet online for you to read before you agree to take part. If you have any questions arising from this, please ask me before you decide whether you wish to take part. You will be given an electronic copy of this consent form to keep.

I confirm that I have read the statement provided for the above research project. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

☐

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time, without needing to provide a reason.

☐

I agree to the interview being BOTH audio and video-recorded.

☐

OR

I agree to the interview being ONLY audio-recorded

☐

I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in the research project and publication.

☐

I would like to view and edit my transcript after the interview.

☐

I agree to take part in the above study

☐

For the participant to sign

Name of participant:

Initials:

Date:

For the researcher to sign

Name of the Researcher:

Initials:

Date:

One copy to the participant and one to the researcher

Interview Questions

Background

Name:

Age:

Gender:

Occupation:

Sexuality:

Ethnicity:

(Battle Royale) Videogames

- How long have you been playing videogames?
- When did you start playing Battle Royale videogames?
- What sort of gamer would you describe yourself as? i.e. (hard-core- casual?)
- Do you play these games on PC or console?
- How often do you play?
- When and where do you normally play videogames?
- Why do you play videogames?
- What other types of games do you play?
- What is your favourite Battle Royale videogame?
- Why do you think these games are popular?
- Do you play these games with friends or by yourself?

Videogaming Community

- Do you interact with other players?
- Do you interact with the gaming community on forums and social media?

- Do you watch streams? Do you stream yourself?
- Have you been to any gaming arenas, events or conventions?
- What do you think about the gaming community?
- How do you think other people think about the gaming community?

Emotional/Affective

- What does it feel like playing these games?
- What is the most memorable moment you have had playing these games?
- Are there particular aspects that heighten your emotions or engagements with these games?
- How do these game amplify these feelings?
- What parts of these games are the most enjoyable?
- What about moments of frustration, or boredom? What makes you stop playing?
- Do you think much about how violent these games are? What are your thoughts on the level of violence in these games?
- What does it feel like interacting with other players?
- What does it feel like interacting with the gaming community online?

Political Participation

- Do you follow, or have you followed, politics?
- Do you vote, or have you voted in, elections?
- Do you go to, or have been to protests? Have you done any activist work?
- Do you think young people are marginalised in politics?
- Do you think young people should be more involved in politics?
- Do you think there is a difference between how young people and older generations think about politics?

Politics of Videogames

- What do you think about the links between these types of videogames and violence in young people? Why do you think these games are (not) violent?
- What do you think about the links between these types of videogames and addiction? Why do you think these games are (not) addictive?
- What do you think about micro-transactions in videogames?
- What do you think about the links between the military and games like PUBG and Call of Duty: Warzone?
- What are your thoughts on videogames and politics? Do you think these games have political messages?
- How do you think the gaming community talks about politics?
- Have you seen or experienced discrimination yourself while playing these games? (e.g. sexism, racism, homophobia, xenophobia, ableism)
- Have you seen or experienced discrimination yourself in your interactions with the gaming community?

Streamer Specific

- Why do you stream?
- How often do you stream?
- What is it like engaging with people who are watching your stream?
- What does it feel like streaming?
- Do you talk about world events in your streams? Do you talk about politics in your streams?

Modder Specific

- Why do you make 'mods' for videogames?
- What types of 'mods' do you make?
- Do you think about the 'politics' of these mods you make?