

The Pleasures and Practices of Virtualised Consumption in Digital Spaces

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ABSTRACT

Videogames now enable players to spend virtual fortunes on exotic virtual goods and even create and sell virtual artefacts. Online consumers may also browse endlessly through virtual marketplaces and create and display virtual goods. These virtual commodities are desired and enjoyed as if they were real, but are not actually bought, or owned in a material sense – often resulting in frustration amongst marketers. In this paper we account for virtualised consumption by highlighting its pleasures. We start by historicising the trend towards imaginary consumption practices, depicting virtual consumption as the latest stage in an ongoing transformation of consumption from a focus on utility through to emotional value, sign value and finally playful experience. Viewed from this perspective, we consider the role of emerging virtual consumption spaces as liminoid, transformational play-spaces and explore examples of consumer practices found in these spaces. Ultimately we argue that virtual spaces encourage the development of new consumption practices and therefore constitute the ability of the market to stimulate consumers' imaginations in new and exciting ways based on digital play.

Keywords

Consumption, virtual, liminoid, video games, experiential marketing.

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INTRODUCTION

A desire amongst individuals to engage in playful, consumption-like activities can now readily be observed in videogames and other virtual spaces. Some of the best selling video games of recent years contain aspects of consumption, for example *The Sims*, *Grand Turismo* and *Everquest*. Consumer desire for the virtual things found in online games is such that eBay has traded over \$6m worth of virtual items [10]. Consumers have spent from \$5.00 on virtual designer outfits [42] to \$2,000 on powerful avatars [29]. But in contrast to those who eagerly spend money on virtual goods, other consumers are blamed for *not* buying real goods. They browse online stores filling shopping baskets with desired goodies only to then abandon them, (Over 60% percent of online shoppers abandon their shopping baskets before completing a transaction [27, 38, 6], with the value of abandoned carts twice that of fulfilled orders [12]). Concerned e-marketers have continually improved design, security and customer services in an effort to address this 'problem' of non-purchase, but there may be a contradiction here. At the same time as there is increasing evidence of demand for virtual consumption, behaviour that remains only focused on the virtual is somehow considered to be a failure in the online experience. In this paper we consider a range of virtualised consumption experiences ranging from the playfulness of digital consumption spaces like *eBay*, to consumption practice in playful, digital spaces like *Everquest*. We speculate about the similarities between these practices by placing them in an historical context and exploring their potential to provide pleasure by encouraging and actualizing consumer fantasies.

THE EMERGENCE OF IMAGINARY CONSUMPTION

The trend towards virtualised consumption in the West is told by Baudrillard [2] as stages of simulation. Initially an image stood for the real as a direct representation, but following the industrialisation of production, a wearing away of this relationship takes place resulting in a situation where any distinction between representation and reality has imploded (disappeared) leaving only the simulacrum, a world of signs with no basis in reality. This irruption of the sign is also highlighted by McCracken's [28] history of consumption. In the 19th century consumption of signs started to become a permanent feature of everyday culture: "more and more social meanings were being loaded into goods through new and more sophisticated devices for meaning transfer" [28]. The availability of consumer goods and the potential for social mobility based on consumer appropriation of sign values, led to a democratisation of consumer practices. The result was a reduced relevance of utilitarian value in favour of more aesthetic dimensions. This trend was further exacerbated through the 'Fordist deal'. Between the turn of the 20th century and the 1960s, the alienating monotony of factory work was accepted in return for a dream of a more satisfying life provided by the cornucopia of goods found in the marketplace [13, 4, 20]. But this symbiosis of efficient production and desire laden consumption was undermined by saturated markets throughout the 1970s which called for a different relationship between consumer desire and consumption. Post-fordist production regimes needed to become synchronised around more transient, intangible, information-based commodities [35, 18, 17]. Featherstone [15] summarises the problem that modern economies have in using up what is ever more cheaply produced, suggesting, "to control growth and manage the surplus the only solution is to destroy or squander the excess in the form of *games*, religion, art, wars, death" (our emphasis). Lee [26] views this gradual metamorphosis of consumption as a transition from material to experiential commodities. The productive apparatus increasingly creates experiences to be enjoyed, but used up during the act of consumption, resulting in never ending series of new consumption events. Similarly, Firat and Dholakhia [17] see contemporary consumption as a carnival of hyperreal moments, where the sign becomes what is to be consumed. Postmodern consumers endlessly

engage in highly pleasurable, simulated experiences such as tourism, shopping malls, and the media [41, 22, 17], resulting in what Pine and Gilmore [30] have called ‘experiential economies’.

This aestheticisation of everyday life has given way to an endless rekindling of dream worlds, desire and pleasure for consumers [15]. Meaning embedded in objects transforms even mundane goods into resources for imaginary vistas that signify desirable values (see [1]). Their capacity to conjure dream worlds is revealed most obviously in McCracken’s thesis of displaced meaning [28], Campbell’s romantic, hedonist consumer [9] and postmodern appraisals of the evocative power of the image [18, 11, 17]. In these stories of consumer behaviour purchase is preceded by speculation of how life can be improved upon by consumption. Belk, Ger and Askeergard [5] postulate that consumer desire for commodities is based on a self-promise of an “altered state of being, involving an altered state of social relationships”. McCracken’s displacement theory advances a similar position: “individuals anticipate the possession of the good and, with this good, the possession of certain ideal circumstances” [28]. Similarly, Campbell’s consumers are dream-artists who “employ their creative, imaginative powers to construct mental images, which they consume for the intrinsic pleasure they provide” [9]. Consumption therefore takes place largely in the mind as an aesthetic, imaginary (virtual) experience that relies on material goods and embodied experiences only as a resource to stimulate and actualise an imagination made restless by marketing. All of this is to conceptualise contemporary consumption as a game, only loosely regulated and framed by the rules of a diverse and ever-changing marketplace. Consumption may involve many games: the thrill of leisure pursuits as *ilinx*; the gamble of an impulse purchase as *alea*; fashion items as *mimicry* (identity play); and veblenesque conspicuous, competitive consumption as *agon*, to borrow Caillois’s play forms [7]. But it is daydreams, a play of the mind, controlled and manipulated by individuals (see [37]) that best captures the desire individuals have to endlessly consume. Consumers’ imaginings start with what the market has to offer. They then act *as if*, enjoying an improvised game of make believe. Like play theorists such as Schechner [32], contemporary consumer behaviour researchers reject conceptualisations of the consumer as a rational economic being and place imagination and daydreams at the heart of human action. However, Campbell [9] highlights that the desire consumers have to make real that which is dreamed about puts a brake on the imagination by focusing consumers’ daydreams towards that which is available in the marketplace.

VIRTUALISED CONSUMPTION AS TRANSFORMATIONAL PLAYSPACE

The idea that consumers first dream up imaginary experiences and are then driven to actualise them suggests a relationship between the real and the imaginary. But we now also have something in between: virtual reality. Sutton-Smith [37] highlights that both the mundane and the virtual might be viewed as real, but opposed to the imagination as a powerful driver of culture - reversing the previous privileging of the real over the unreal, and in doing so confirming the status of play as fundamental to the development of culture [23]. So we have the imagination influencing material space and now also digital, virtual space. Shields [34] presents a matrix that attempts to disentangle the various relationships between these spaces (Figure 1).

	Real	Possible
Ideal	Virtual	Abstract
Actual	Material	Probability

Figure 1: matrix of the forms of the real and possible, Shields (2002)

The terms are ambiguous and open to semantic confusion, so examples illustrate best. In its performance, the practice of driving a car (in a material sense), is *actually real*; that is it is realised and actualised. A material probability (the probability of a car turning a corner) that is actual and possible, would be categorised as *actually possible*. The actually possible is also the limit of material consumer desire. The development of the digital virtual however, may invite an individual to own and drive a virtual spacecraft. This spaceship is a subjective *ideal*, but is still real and when performed through play this *idealised reality* is also actualised. In this way abstract ideas can be made real in virtual spaces and then actualised by playing with a videogame or with other interactive media. The digitally, virtual may therefore allow the actualization of fantasy beyond what the material market can offer.

Such relationships between digital spaces and the material world have invited analysis of the virtual as a space where new modes of being may be experienced. For example, digital spaces are romanticised as zones of free experimentation and transformation [39, 33] and therefore catalysts for cultural change [31]. This potential is sustained by the decentralised nature of communication and the role of interactivity, which attest *against* existing structures and produce new behaviours. Gee [21] explains this role of simulation in terms of learning by highlighting how digital games create projective identities which may be an inversion of that which is normally adopted, allowing for new perspectives and therefore a reflection on that which is experienced. Likewise, Frasca [19] demonstrates that the experimental *what if* allowed by interactive games permits players to reflect on complex issues producing an understanding not normally found in non-interactive media. A consistent theme that emerges from these observations is that digital virtual spaces may exhibit liminal characteristics and are therefore potential arenas for cultural change. Turner [40] noted that the periods of change required by pre-modern societies were often accompanied by ritualised festivals, celebrations and carnivals which he termed liminal, (but which might also be conceptualised as play [23]). Turner then argued that these formal, obligatory spaces have been superseded by more fragmented and individualised liminoid (liminal-like) spaces. The liminoid is freer than the liminal: more an outcome of choice, participation and free will. It is observed as moments of individual change or disorder. Unlike the liminal which serves to maintain order in society, the idiosyncratic disorder of the liminoid often serves as a critique or opposition to existing structures, but the role of liminoid spaces remains that of inducing, reacting to, but finally coming to terms with cultural change, often through the characteristics of inversion and unreality. This inversion and out-of-the-ordinariness, is also consistent with many attempts to define play as a free, separate, uncertain, make-believe space [7, 23] and therefore also consistent with recent conceptualisations of consumption that capture its playful and imaginative objectives.

Both contemporary consumption practice and now also behaviours in digital spaces may allow for the actualization of the imagination. What we are only just now able to observe are a range of new practices that virtual spaces are encouraging and the different imaginative *as ifs* required of consumers in actualising the imagination through performance in virtual space.

THE PRACTICES OF VIRTUALISED CONSUMPTION IN DIGITAL SPACES

The implications of interactive media for consumer practices have already been hinted at. Digital games may perfectly represent something of Lee's [26] ideal commodity form as endlessly novel, paid for experiences [24]. Featherstone [16] has also commented on the dream-like experiences created by digital technologies of consumption, borrowing Benjamin's *flanuer* to capture the aesthetic experience of online shopping as stimulation of the imagination by images of goods as they pass before the individual. We now consider examples of practices that further illustrate these observations.

Falk and Campbell [14] describe the various displays on offer in material stores as 'experiential free-ware', highlighting that their stimulation of the imagination may be pleasurable in itself in addition to a stage towards purchase. This then is a long established pre-digital virtual consumption game. The web and many video games are now crowded with digital, virtual displays from which individuals may gain similar pleasures. Of course there are obvious limitations to these experiences. They lack the full range of senses that may be stimulated in and around offline shops (it is not yet possible to smell, touch and taste virtual goods). But against these limitations, the digital, virtual experiences may have other advantages. Much of the pleasure of window-shopping rests on a continuous supply of novel images on which a consumer may rest their eyes whilst imagining ownership [14, 8]. Many digital environments provide potentially endless supplies of glimpsed objects, each novel, elusive and potentially desirable, thus encouraging endless reflection. Virtual window-shopping is therefore enhanced *flanerie*, where the individual is also "capable of great mobility; his pace is not limited to the body's capacity for locomotion" [16]. And these environments offer anonymity. So, for example, the flaneur may indulge in a mask that allows pretence that they are the sort of person that shops for luxury cars, household goods, jewelry or apparel. For the digital flaneur there is no embarrassment in entering luxury stores in cheap clothes, or arriving at a luxury car dealership in an old Ford. This out-of-the-ordinariness is a key characteristic of liminoid space. In addition the material window shopper is restricted to a longing, contemplative gaze, whereas the virtual windows shopper may extend the act of play-shopping to the point of adding desired goods to a basket or trolley (only to abandon them at the very last opportunity, when demand for payment is made by the site). In the case of many games, goods may even be bought with material or virtual money, then prized in a private, individual, virtual space. The daydreams and fantasies that consumers entertain may therefore be actualized in various ways through performance in these spaces. Online retailers, as well as game producers seem to have (possibly unintentionally) provided new resources with which consumers may make believe. In Caillois's terms then [7], consumers engage in both *paidia* (unregulated) play online and perhaps more regulated (*ludus*) play in games. But both involve inversion of normal roles and economic status and a voluntary entry into a liminoid play-space. Through virtual performance ideal-real consumption may be actualised.

A specific example of an online experience that may stimulate a consumer's imagination through endless novelty is eBay. Goods for sale on eBay may not be readily available in a user's locale and are available for view only as long as an auction lasts, presented in an ordered 'procession' before the gaze of a would-be buyers. Many more people view each auction than actually bid and although not all bidders 'win' (a term that in itself reveals eBay's gameness) there may be a sense of ownership for at least as long as they are wining. Amazon presents another approach to stimulating the imagination by offering users a 'wish list'. Any item seen and desired, but not yet

afforded (and possibly never so) can be stored in a personalised virtual (real and ideal) area. Goods in this space achieve an almost magical status. They are not yet owned by the would-be buyer, but neither are they not owned. Their virtual image remains in the possession of the individual, providing pleasure as an item that when acquired will fulfill the wishes of the consumer. Yet another approach is to encourage potential customers to experience a virtual version of material commodities. For example BMW invite users of their web site to customise a car with different trims, wheels and colours and luxury jewelry maker Bulgari offers the opportunity to download a working virtual watch. It is again real, but ideal. Individuals don't materially own a Bulgari, but they don't not own one. They may tell the time on their virtual Bulgari and in doing so actualise ownership in that performance.

The parallels between virtual and material consumption clearly go further than play with these forms of digital, experiential freeware however. The performance of digital play also allows daydreams of ownership to be actualised through purchase using material wealth. *Habbo hotel* is a graphical chat room based on a virtual (ideal and real) hotel. A user may experience the hotel via an avatar. They may take a swim in the virtual pool, or enjoy a virtual drink in the virtual bar, experiencing these things through reflective, online performance. A 'Habbo' may also rent a virtual room. Once rented, they may decorate the room with furniture purchased with material money. As even the most exotic room in Habbo hotel costs 'pocket money', teenagers with little income in the offline world can become rich and successful Habbos in their online performances (much like the promise of the metaverse in Stephenson's novel *Snow Crash*, [36]).

A player may not even need material money, or virtual shops selling material goods to perform virtual shopping. For example *Gran Turismo* includes virtual showrooms which invite players to shop for branded virtual cars with virtual money. Wining races in the game provides a player with virtual 'prize money' with which to buy more and more desirable models until they own a virtual garage full of exotic virtual cars. A player of *The Sims* again uses virtual money to buy a virtual home and fill it with all the virtual commodities they may wish to posses. Other games include more unusual consumption-like activities. For example in the latest *Grand Theft Auto* games a player 'earns' money through performed, virtual, criminal activities and may 'steal' desirable, expensive vehicles. In this game the means to get money may be criminal (another liminoid inversion), but the pleasures of wealth and desirable commodities are still very apparent and players may even cruse the virtual cities as an experiential tourist might.

Finally, the types of virtual goods available in games may also differ from those in the actual marketplace. The pleasures of searching for and finding a rare and powerful magic staff in online spaces like *Everquest's* marketplace may be new and exciting to a consumer who is more normally restricted to searches for food, clothes and other 'mundane' consumer goods, but the process of imagining and then actualizing that imagination remains. A further development here is that consumers may produce their own virtual goods through online performance. Players of *Everquest* may manufacture artifacts (*crafting*), often as an 'occupation', another inversion of normal consumer culture that may encourage reflection.

CONCLUSION

The performance of consumer daydreams and fantasies are clearly not the only thing happening in virtual digital spaces, but the pre-existing trend towards consumption as a play with signs, gifted with meaning and enjoyed in consumers' imaginations (as long as they may be actualised through the performance of shopping) seems to have encouraged new forms of playful, virtual

consumption experiences. In addition to access to a wider range of ever more novel and exciting goods and experiences, consumers may enjoy ‘experiential digital freeware’ that allows them to act out consumer daydreams in virtual spaces; they may act *as if* with virtual goods that they might never materially possess, but still buy with material money, and they may even enter whole new economic worlds where their virtual wealth, status and abilities differ greatly from their embodied, material being.

These various forms of digital, virtual consumption, to paraphrase Sutton-Smith [37] are not only not consumption, but also *not* not consumption: playful virtual consumption is therefore not consumption but is what consumption means. Rather than chastising consumers for failing to purchase online, marketers might recognise the ‘successes’ of manufactured, virtual performances. These may be more seductive and satisfying than many mundane experiences available in the high street and shopping malls (who in turn may rise to this challenge with even more dramatic and exciting experiences of their own with which to capture consumers’ imaginations [25]). And this last point suggests a motivation for marketers to better understand the pleasures and experiences of virtualised consumption as a form of play. These playful experiences in liminoid, digital spaces may allow for the renegotiation of the normal ‘rituals’ and ‘symbols’ of consumption that constitute the cohesive shared experienced that sustain our existing consumer society, including and perhaps centrally the reflection of individuals on their own selves as consumer-players. It may be tempting to see this as liberating, but of course these new consumer practices are still well within the market place. This is summarised in Figure 2.

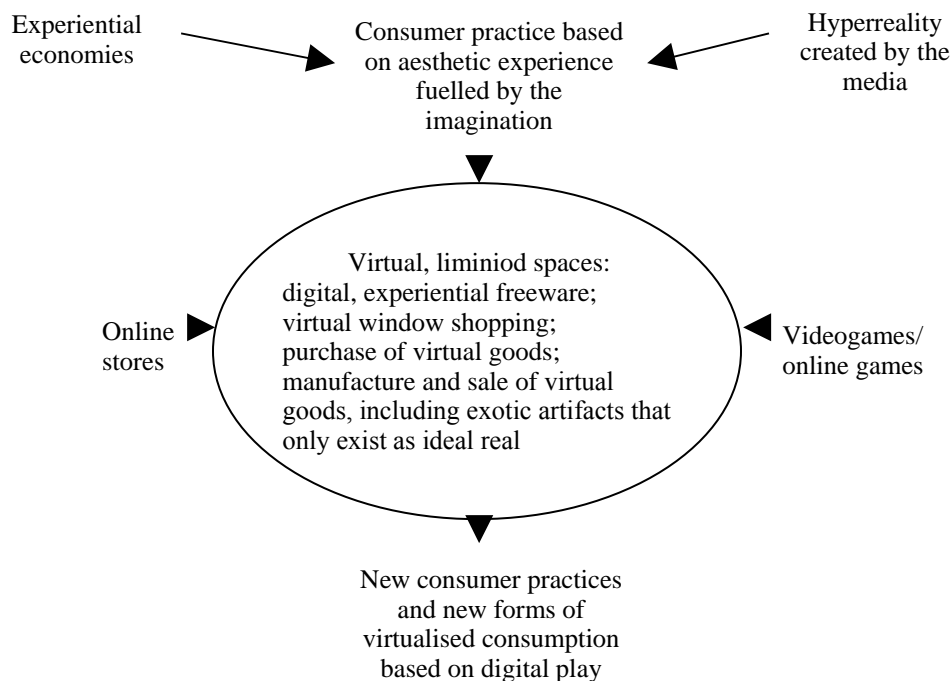


Figure2: The transformational qualities of digital, virtualised consumption

Castravona [10] wrote of the potential for virtual economies. What is missing is the explanation of virtual consumption that must accompany them. Kline et al [24] further articulated a link

between consumer culture and video games. Here we have expanded this, speculating a more central relationship that results in viewing much online consumer behaviour as digital play, similar to that found in many popular video games. Marketers may attempt to ‘capture’ consumer play through advergames and brand placement in video games, but consumers may also create their own consumption games out of videogames and also from digital, experiential freeware. There is a danger that these play-forms may be dismissed as a focus of study by marketers who view play as trivial, and also by games researchers who focus only on pre-packaged games. The result is that we may miss much of the significance of digital play for the subtle and ongoing transformation of consumer culture. Several issues come out of this line of argument. How might we accurately conceptualise the various forms and trends in virtual consumption that we have only illustrated here (the relationship between material and virtual goods, money and performance, any combination of which may now be seen)? And if consumption lies at the heart of much digital play in the West, is the same true in other cultures? If, as Huizinga [23] suggested, play drives and reflects culture, would a less consumption-orientated culture produce significantly different digital games?

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