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Gamer Resistance to Marketization of Play

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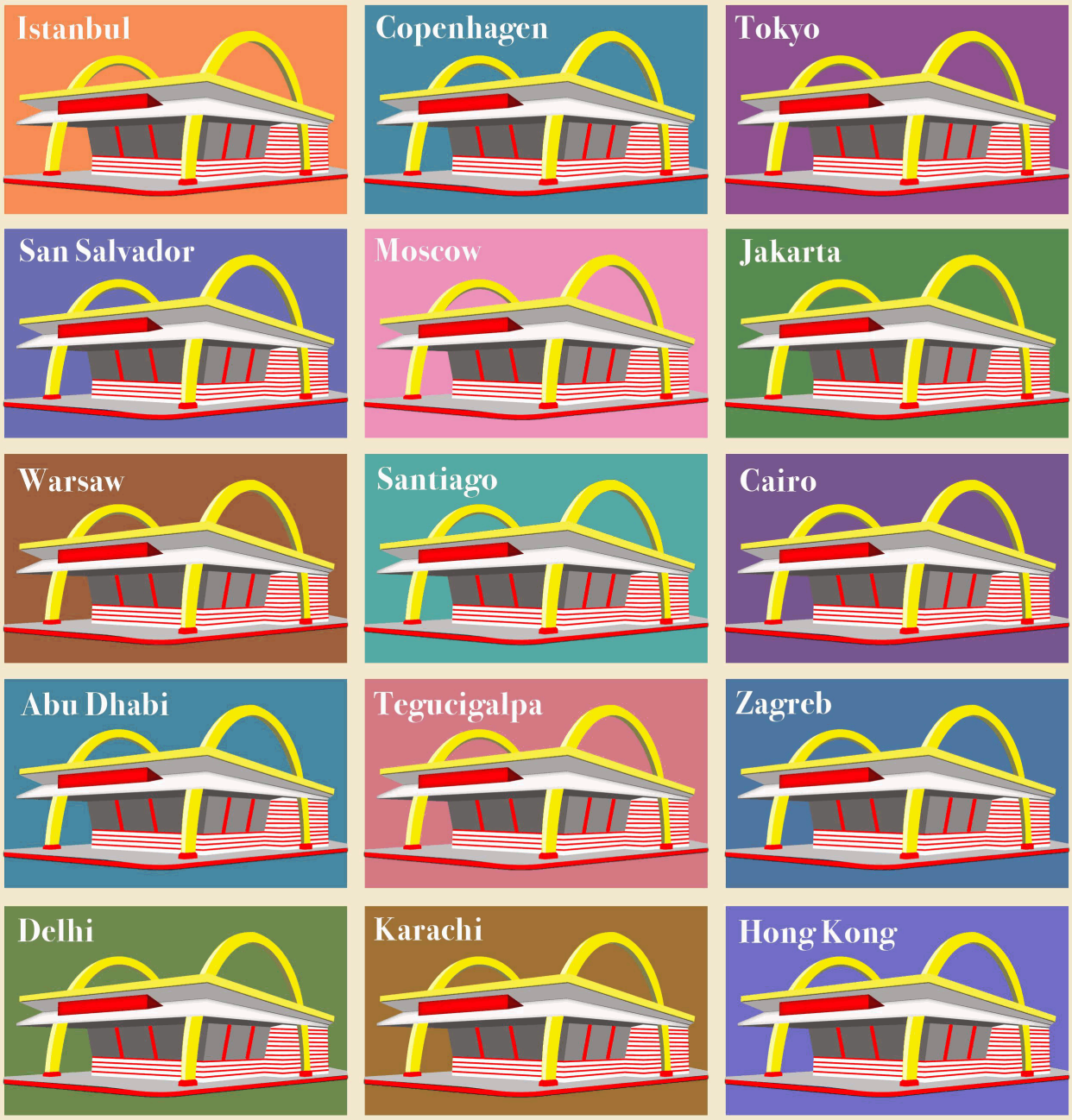

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Gamer Resistance to Marketization of Play

Jacob C. Almaguer

Abstract

Video games provide an important context to understand the role of markets in a virtual space. Particularly, consumerism has appeared to have transferred from actual reality in the virtual reality in video games. For instance, growth in use of microtransactions by companies enable consumers to exchange real currency for in-game currency. Thus, the distinction between reality and fiction appears to be blurring. This may be problematic given the hegemony of AAA video game developers (Triple-A games are those with very high development and promotion budgets), commonality of neoliberal appeals in video games, and the potential influence that video games can have on the gamer's material world. This article provides an analysis of the connections between video games and a market society and identifies some forms of consumer rejection of the commodification of virtual items in the virtual worlds established by video games. Additionally, the implications of microtransactions on the market in video games along with resistance to commodification of video games are discussed.

Keywords

video games, virtuality, microtransactions, modding, markets, market resistance

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Gamer Resistance to Marketization of Play

Introduction

The video game industry is projected to surpass $90 billion in global market value by 2020 (Statista 2018). Researchers have focused on the potential that video games have to shape the attitudes, beliefs (Chen 2013; Delwiche 2007), and behaviors of gamers (Molesworth and Denegri-Knott 2007a). Additionally, extant literature identifies the dominance of hegemonic AAA (Triple-A or high-budget) video game developers (Planells 2017) and neoliberal appeals present in video games (Perez-Latorre and Oliva 2017; Wolf 2017). For the latter, this includes consumerism, individualism, the construction of self (Perez-Latorre and Oliva 2017), and domination (Vanolo 2012). These appeals suggest a need to further consider the cultural and societal discourses surrounding video games. Particularly, there is a need to understand the impact that video games have at a broader level (Corliss 2011; Dholakia and Reyes 2013). Although video games propagate hegemonic ideological constructions as such, the communities built around gaming are fertile grounds for developing subaltern, resistant, and alternative cultural forms and practices.

Modding has become a rising phenomenon in communities dedicated to particular games. Mods are programming that are created by users to enhance the gameplay according to the gamer's preferences. More specifically, technically advanced fans of specific games use the game as raw material and add upon or improve the game (Coleman and Dyer-Witheford 2007) through the development of code that is ultimately made available to the community members who can download and use it in their own game. Attempts by video game developers, Bethesda (e.g. Elder Scrolls and Fallout series) and Valve (e.g. Left 4 Dead and Portal series; digital distribution platform, Steam), to commodify these mods were largely rejected by modding communities and modders themselves (Joseph 2018). The modding community recognized the attempted corporate effort to profit from creative efforts taken by modders and reacted to it, as I explain further below. Fırat and Dholakia (1998) argue that certain self-expressive communities may reject the market system and exist separate from mainstream market culture. The modding community appear to have established this separation and rejected corporate attempts to profit off of them. Modders also appear to exemplify the subjectivity of the "construer" as they autonomously produce and share symbols in a capitalist world (Fırat and Dholakia 2017).

In search for increasing their revenue streams and maximizing profits, video game developers adopted another strategy that is seemingly

derived from communal modding practices. Major game developers increasingly begun to include microtransactions in the gameplay, in which video game consumers pay for in-game currency to purchase virtual goods in a virtual market within the game environment to enhance their gaming experience (e.g. see Zhang and Dholakia 2018 for the tremendous growth of virtual goods and microtransactions in China). These microtransactions have become a huge market as video game developers recognize the revenue potential of these additional monetization tactics (Švelch 2017); for example, Activision Blizzard earned $4 billion in revenue in 2017 from microtransactions alone (Makuch 2018). Due to their emerging rapid growth and their direct reference to real currency, it seems important to study the implications of microtransactions in the market, yet there is a notable lack of academic literature on the subject; of particular interest is the apparent acceptance for some microtransactions over others. For instance, cosmetic items appear to have been accepted among gamers; however, microtransactions that give the gamers competitive advantages within the gameplay are dubbed as “pay to win” and rejected. Further, gamers express their dissent when they feel that they need to pay extra, beyond the price of the base game, for downloadable content (DLC) to get access to the full game. The implications are argued to be of importance given the centrality of markets to society both in the material (Slater and Tonkiss 2001) and virtual worlds (Perez-Latorre and Oliva 2017).

In this article, I will investigate modding as a community that gamers desire to keep separate from corporate efforts, and the rejection of certain type of microtransactions in this context. I will do this by analyzing game developers’ publicity material, online discussions within gaming communities (including YouTube videos, Facebook groups, and Reddit threads), and other scholarly literature on the subject. The remainder of the article is organized as follows. First, I briefly explore the connections between markets and virtual worlds in video games. In addition, I examine consumer rejection of certain market appeals by video game developers. These discussions also include exploration of the role of modding and microtransactions in the further development of markets in video games and the forms of market resistance that have arisen.

Market Society and Video Games

This section briefly discusses past literature that has made the connection between video games and markets. Such exposition will provide an overview of marketization components that have made their way into gameplay including elements of creating the perfect consumer world (Kline, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2003) and a desired individual identity (e.g.

Kozinets and Kedzior 2009). As a result, virtual markets exist as something that lies between the actual and virtual (Dholakia and Reyes 2013). Plus, as gamers try to make sense of the liminal space, they determine what is acceptable in the virtual market. In short, this section provides the backdrop for an understanding of the forms of resistance to marketization that have emerged.

Video games are closely connected to American culture as they largely focus on high levels of competition, consumerism, fast pace, and individual identity (Wolf 2017). *BioShock Infinite* appears to resonate with neoliberal values such as individualism, consumerism, construction of self, etc. (Perez-Latorre and Oliva 2017). Additionally, neoliberal values of individualism and ruthless competition are present in *Grand Theft Auto* (Vanolo 2012). Similarly, in *The Sims*, the gamer is the director/controller of "a potentially perfectible consumer world" (Kline et al. 2003, p. 285) as the endless simulation enables endless desire for new experiences and commodities (Molesworth and Denegri-Knott 2007a). The appeals of these video games appear to mirror hegemonic forms of capitalism as "development" is forced upon "underdeveloped countries" (e.g. McMichael 2005). In fact, this dominant logic of consumerism present in the virtual goods market is often at odds with traditional values of non-Western countries. For instance, in China, globalization gave rise to individualism, hedonism, and a growth of virtual markets; however, traditional values of collectivism and government, media, and family constraints persist (Zhang 2016).

Video games provide an important context for the understanding the construction of an identity in a virtual space (Kozinets and Kedzior 2009). Unlike the 'corporeal world' in which one's identity is largely constructed by social, economic, political, and other external cultural factors, a gamer's virtual identity is constructed by his/her choices, which leads to a sense of 'self' created in the virtual world (Hinsch and Bloch 2009) representing either an 'idealized' (Vicdan and Ulusoy 2008) or 'possible' self (Belk 2013), which is not necessarily possible in actual reality (Lin, Lin and Yang 2017; Molesworth and Denegri-Knott 2007b; Molesworth 2009). For instance, in this special issue, Baldwin (2018) sheds light on the conflict experienced by transgender people in actual reality and the ability they have to construct an idealized self in virtual reality. Thus, the construction of a virtual identity is a response to the cultural, political, economic, and moral constraints in the physical world to express oneself properly. Namely, to get away from a material reality to reach desires (Molesworth and Denegri-Knott 2007b; Molesworth 2009) one may seek an alternative to or liberation from the constraining forces of actual reality.

Despite these attempts to liberate from actual realities, there is a tendency for actual orders of life to be replicated in virtual life. In this special issue, Brown (2018) identifies an important paradox as gamers try to escape the constraints of their lives in the physical world, they simultaneously encounter constraints in game. Given the permeability of markets in video games (Perez-Latorre and Oliva 2017), individuals that appear to be escaping the market are actually participating in a different virtual market. This represents a transfer of consumerism into virtual reality (Dholakia and Reyes 2013). For instance, the construction of an identity is compatible with hegemonic ideologies as the individual desires an accumulation of in-game currency and virtual items in order to best construct oneself (Perez-Latorre and Oliva 2017).

The virtual space in which the virtual markets are established lies somewhere between the actual and virtual world (Dholakia and Reyes 2013). The purchases that are made in this virtual space are conceptualized in extant literature as digital virtual consumption which lies in a liminal space between imaginary and material (Denegri-Knott and Molesworth 2010). Market convergence enables individuals to consume in order to enhance status in games and enable video games to get closer to real life simulated transactions (Ip 2008). This appears to be in line with conceptualizations of market logic as individuals can purchase status (Slater and Tonkiss 2001). One could argue that the growth in microtransactions enables video games to become closer to actual reality as real-life currency is used to purchase immaterial virtual goods. Particularly, individuals express perceived ownership of virtual goods despite no physical ownership of the goods themselves (Belk 2013; Watkins and Molesworth 2012). The use of real currency may heighten one's perceived ownership of these goods.

Market Resistance in Video Games

Arguably, the video game industry is largely dominated by hegemonic AAA video game developers (mid- to large-size publishers who usually have higher budgets) who prioritize profit and popularity, and perceive creativity and artistry only as instrumental to achieve profitability (Planells 2017). It is argued in extant literature that there is a need to emancipate consumers from the forces of the market (Fırat and Venkatesh 1995) due to the constraints that they place on individual identity and on human freedom (Kozinets 2002). While it may not be possible to fully escape the forces of the market, consumers can collectively act to create social spheres that are autonomous and free from market relations (Izberk-Bilgin 2010; Kozinets 2002) and the routine/unsatisfactory components of actual reality (Molesworth 2009). Thus, video games appear to enable individuals to form

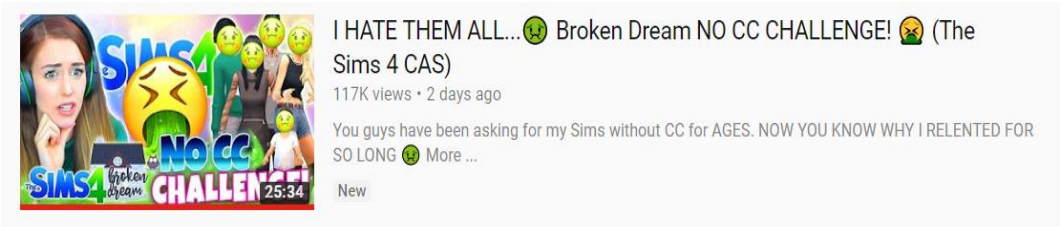
communities that act as autonomous social spheres as such. Particularly, individuals may reject the commodification of goods that they associate within a particular culture that does not lend itself to profit-making mechanisms (e.g. mods, pay-to-win microtransactions).

Modding

Even though there is an apparent hegemony of video game developers, video game consumers express dissent over ideologies at odds with their own. Modding has become a game changing—pun intended—community-based effort in video gaming in which gamers take the game into their own hands, adding extra features or fixing problems that the video game developer has not addressed (Lee 2018). These could be cosmetic changes to a character or environment, additional quests, or additional usable items, among others. Modders upload mod files (also referred to as custom content) online for others to download and practically insert the changes into their game. Modding arises from a perception that a game is the raw material for technically savvy fans to improve upon or add to a game for the collective community (Coleman and Dyer-Witheford 2007). There are communities dedicated to the sharing of and recommendation of mods to others. For instance, Nexus Mods (www.nexusmods.com) supports 615 games such as Skyrim, Fallout 4, and The Witcher 3 and forums exists where gamers discuss and recommend mods for specific games in community driven Nexus websites. Some gamers express distaste at the idea of playing the base game with no mods (also referred to as 'vanilla gameplay') as it does not allow them the customization options that they desire. For instance, vanilla Skyrim pales in comparison to hyperreal Skyrim made possible through retexture mods, see Figure 1. Similarly, custom content in Sims allows for the creation of characters that look more realistic and more variety in clothing options. Figure 2 is a screenshot from YouTuber, Clare Siobhan, who expresses disgust at the idea of not using custom content for her Sims.

Figure 1: Vanilla vs. Modded Skyrim (YouTube Thumbnail, JustinJNB)

Figure 2: Clare Siobhan YouTube Thumbnail (Posted on October 8, 2018)



Given the communal support for mods in Skyrim, in April 2015, Bethesda and Valve implemented a paid system in which each developer and the modders themselves split the profits (Joseph 2018). This was largely rejected by consumers of mods and modders alike and after experiencing backlash online, the program was discontinued and refunds for purchases were provided after only four days (Joseph 2018). Mods often incur creative risks that are not likely to be pursued by a video game developer (Postigo 2007) and I argue that commodifying mods entraps modders and does not allow these creative risks to be taken. Joseph (2018) warns that the distinction between the hobbies (gaming) and work lives will dissolve if trends toward commodification of gaming continue; essentially, play becomes work.

While emergent gameplay, which refers to gameplay that is unexpected by the game designer, can exist in the base game (Brown

2018), this is within the rules set by the designer. I argue that modding is beyond emergent gameplay as the modders create their own rules. They use this base game to take it beyond what was anticipated by the designers. Previous literature claims that for a dedicated fan base, there can be a desire for "more expansive world—more territory—beyond the official incorporated media property" (Dholakia, Reyes and Kerrigan 2018, p. 346). Modding enables the community to support the game and add to it even after support by the developer has been discontinued (Joseph 2018). Corporate attempts at profiting on these communal efforts make it a business and not something that is being done for fun, something that is intended to provide more life to a beloved game. The end goal of mods is to develop alterations or improvements upon the base of the game itself.

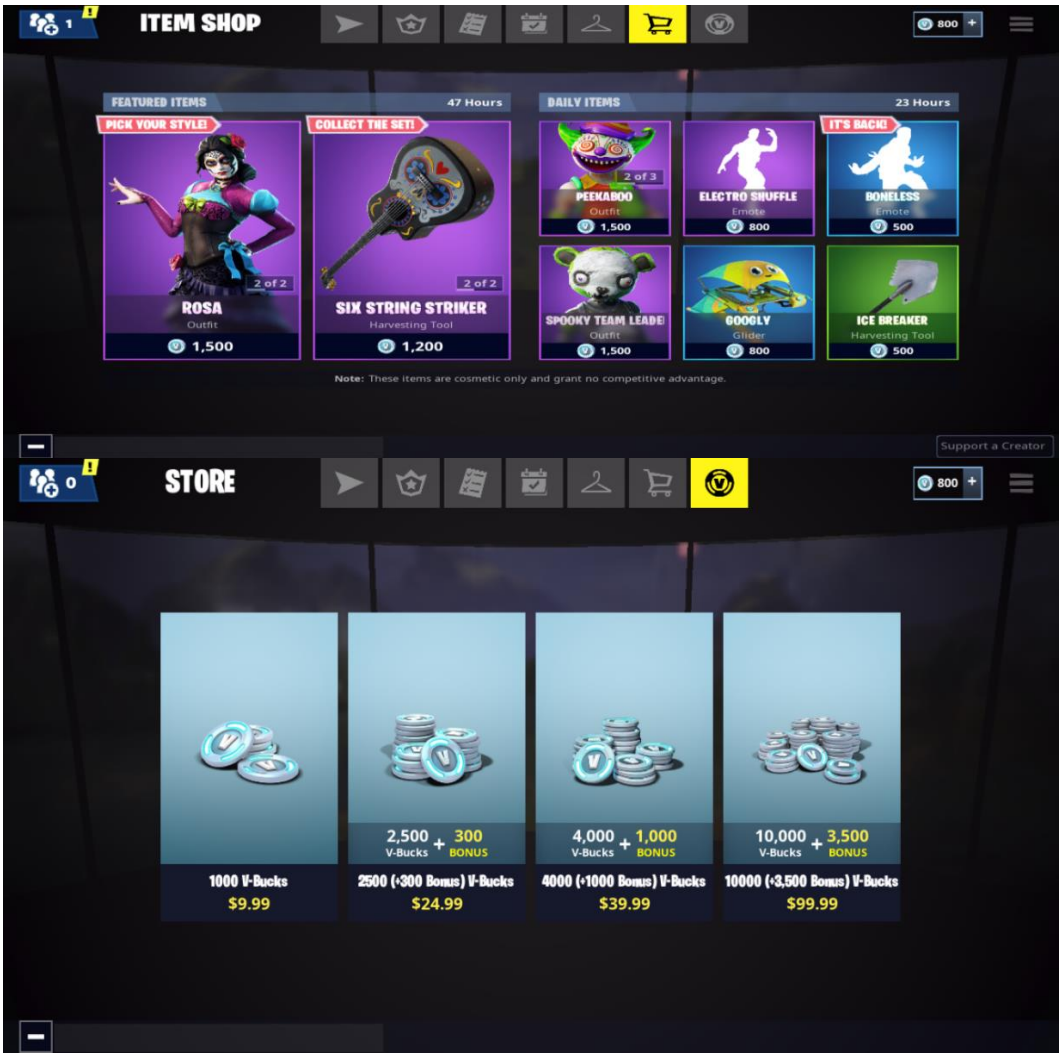
Dholakia et al. (2018) provide a mapping of different spaces of transmedia, the process by which narratives exist across multiple forms of media for the maintenance of an immersive and evolving virtual world. Within Dholakia et al.'s (2018) mapping, modding appears to be in a zone of "non-corporate transmediation-based entrepreneurship," since there is very high fan interest and creativity and very low corporate control in this sphere. While nearly everything can be commodified, there are exceptions (Slater and Tonkiss 2001); thus, the commodification of mods does not appear possible given the communal support for free mods. This falls in line with previous literature that claims self-expressive communities can exist through their separation from culture of the mainstream market (Fırat and Dholakia 1998) and represents an important attempt by consumers to maintain some autonomy of their modding culture from the commercializing forces of the market (Fırat and Dholakia 2017; Slater and Tonkiss 2001). The desire to keep modding as a creative force, separate from corporate efforts, and as an organic source for extending the life of a game remains strong.

Microtransactions

Microtransactions are those opportunities that gamers have to purchase virtual goods in a video game beyond that of the base game. They can be in the form of downloadable content (DLC) which extends play within that gameworld. For instance, a standard edition Call of Duty game costs $59.99; to supplement the base game, a season pass that gives the gamer access to any additional DLC beyond the base, costs around $49.99. In addition, microtransactions can be in the form of cosmetic items that alter the appearance of an in-game character. Fortnite's Battle Royale mode is an entirely free-to-play game; yet, the game brought in $296 million in April 2018 (Thier 2018). The revenue that they do earn comes from purchases of cosmetic items such as skins (outfits/characters), pickaxes (harvesting

tools used to harvest materials in-game), gliders (device used to land on the map in-game), and emotes (dances and gestures). These items do not provide any competitive advantage to the purchaser; rather, they simply alter the appearance of their character. (See Figure 3 for images of the Fortnite Battle Royale item shop and store.) There are two types of microtransactions: those that can alter gameplay (e.g. DLC) and those that alter appearance (e.g. skins).

Figure 3: Fortnite Battle Royale Item Shop and Store



These types of microtransactions appear to have some communal support. They do not alter gameplay; rather, they enable the gamer to better express their identities in game. While owning any these cosmetic items does not alter the game experience per se, not owning these cosmetic items has an effect on the perception that others have of the gamer in the gameplay. Figure 4 shows a post from a Facebook gaming page in which the page expresses the connection between not owning a skin and being a "n00b" ("n00b" means "newbie" in hacker lingo, and it is adopted to gamer culture as referring to a person who does not properly understand the game or lacks ability in gameplay). This connection between not having a skin (a "no skin" or "default skin") and lack of ability is also apparent in YouTube videos in which players adopt the n00b persona (by playing as a "no skin") to surprise people in online games with their levels of skill. Additionally, some other YouTube videos adapt their gameplay upon encountering a "no skin" in game and sometimes help them win the game. (See Figure 5 for a screenshot of two of Lachlan's YouTube videos.) In the first, he protects a "default skin" to help them win; in the second, he adopts the persona of a "default skin". As a result, skins have become an important source of displaying one's identity and making judgments of other's identity in game.

Figure 4: No Skins Post (Gamology – The Best of Gaming, Facebook Page, Posted: October 4, 2018)

Figure 5 Lachlan – YouTube Videos

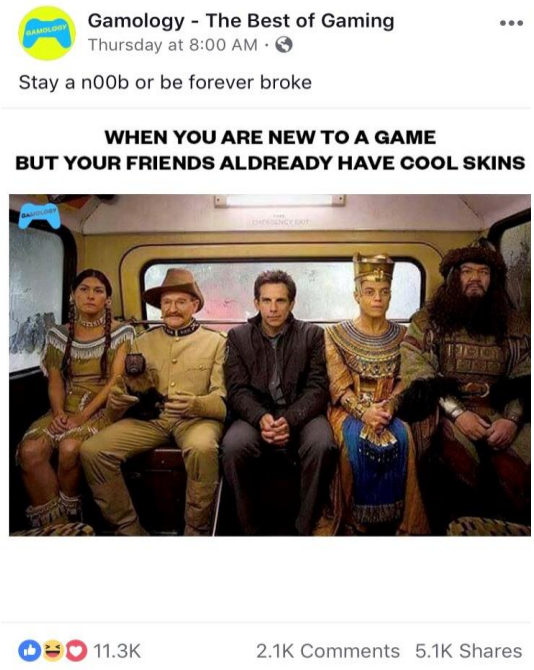
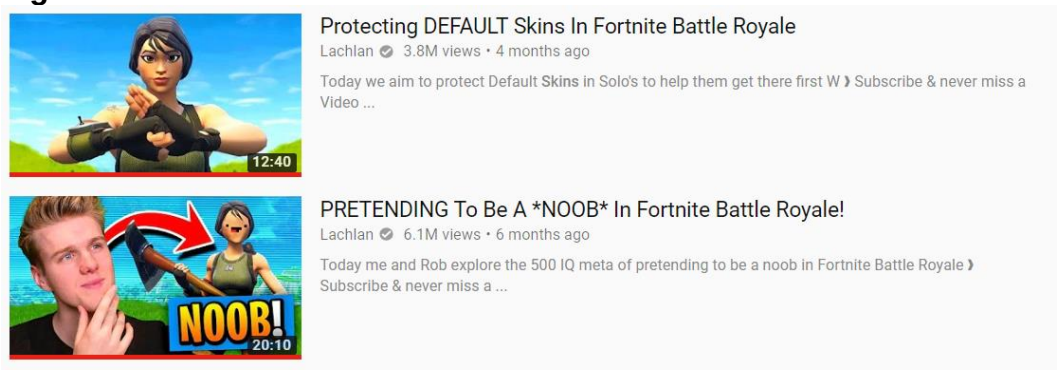


Figure 5 Lachlan – YouTube Videos



While these cosmetic items are accepted by the gaming community, other microtransactions models don't fare as well. Electronic Arts (EA), one of the leaders in video game development, has come under scrutiny for its business models that employ what gamers call "unfinished" games and imposes a need to buy the "finished" game through the DLC that is bound to be offered. In Facebook gaming groups, gamers express discontent with EA games by claiming that they are not getting a finished game and need to purchase that rest of the game as DLC through additional microtransactions. For instance, Figure 6 shows an iteration of a commonly used meme on gaming groups on Facebook. In these memes, "ea" is replaced with the Electronics Arts (EA) logo and the presence of options that should be a part of the base but must be paid for. In Figure 5, the gamer has access to Paul McCartney and Ringo Starr; but, must pay to access George Harrison and John Lennon.

Figure 6 EA Meme (All Things Gaming, Facebook Group; Posted on October 5, 2018)

Similarly, there is an apparent rejection of games that offer microtransactions that enable for pay to win situations. For instance, *Star Wars Battlefront II*, received backlash given the apparent pay-to-win microtransactions available that appeared unfair to consumers. Before the game was even released, gamers became aware of the significant advantage that purchases of loot crates, which give random item(s) to the purchaser when opened, provide over those who did not (Hruska 2018). Additionally, to unlock a single hero character, gamers would either need to play around 40 hours in game or by purchasing it (Whitwam, 2017). An explanation from EA on Reddit garnered significant dissatisfaction and at the time of writing has nearly 700,000 downvotes (https://www.reddit.com/r/StarWarsBattlefront/comments/7cff0b/seriously_i_paid_80_to_have_vader_locked/dppum98/). Reddit is a member driven discussion website where posts are made and other reddit members upvote or downvote posts with posts with higher upvotes representing community approval as the post moves to the top of a page. EA quickly adjusted, removing the microtransactions that enabled advantages to be attained, unlocking Battlefront 2 Heroes (Hruska 2018), and keeping only those that were purely cosmetic (Lumb 2018). Despite these efforts, EA has maintained a negative reputation among gamers. Figure 7 shows an example of a post criticizing the business models pursued by EA.

Figure 7 EA's New Controller (All Things Gaming, Facebook Group; Posted on October 31, 2018)

It is important to consider gamers beyond their common, dismissive perception as people seeking mindless entertainment (Kline et al. 2003). As made apparent from the examples above, gamers have taken means to

express dissatisfaction with certain efforts to monetize game play (Švelch 2017). It appears that gamers are likely to reject virtual goods that provide an in-game advantage as cosmetic items appear to be the microtransactions of choice. This is made apparent through the lack of expressed dissatisfaction with microtransactions in games like Fortnite Battle Royale where the purchases are for purely cosmetic purposes and the simultaneous expressed dissatisfaction with microtransactions in EA games that essential provide a pay to win advantage. Particularly, video game consumers may reject and boycott video games that enable advantages to be attained from microtransactions as this is considered cheating (Švelch 2017). Extant literature identifies the importance of hedonic and conspicuous consumption as motivators behind the purchase of purely aesthetic items (Rodríguez Martínez 2016). Further, video game studies largely refer to the importance of signs and symbols as aesthetic representations in video games (Myers 2006). Given the relative importance of identity construction in video games (e.g. Baldwin 2018; Kozinets and Kedzior 2009), it makes sense that there would be acceptance of microtransactions that enable consumers to better express their identity. Thus, in addition to the unfavorable perception of pay-to-win microtransactions, the importance of cosmetic/aesthetic items may be an underlying reason for the rejection and acceptance of the relevant forms of microtransactions.

Conclusion

This article provides a look at the growing influence of markets in the virtual worlds present in video games. Although gamers are aware of and accept games as commercial products, the virtual space of the games are somehow perceived as alternative spheres that are not completely governed by market logic. Previous literature identifies virtual markets as existing in some liminal space between the actual and virtual worlds (Dholakia and Reyes 2013). Gamers purchase the game as a commodity in their corporeal lives, which is dominated by market relations, but expect there to be a separation from that life in the vitality of the game. This liminal space that the virtual market exists in creates tension as the gamer tries to make sense of the virtual market, and consequently, certain forms of market logic that make sense to them become accepted while others are resisted. Thus, there are examples of certain attempts to extend market logic in video games, which eventually become thwarted by gamers who desire to maintain this separation. In this article, I shed light on two forms of resistance to the attempts at marketization of play: communities dedicated

to modding and dissentient gaming communities for pay-to-win microtransactions.

Modding appears to be of great importance to communities dedicated towards the improvement of and extension of the life of game. Given the desire to have some separation between play and work, in addition to the desire to maintain high levels of creativity and low levels of corporate control, attempts to commodify these mods were largely rejected. Thus, modding represents a form of “non-corporate transmediation based entrepreneurship” (Dholakia et al. 2018). Additionally, the growth of microtransactions are introduced as they appear to enhance the effects of the market in these virtual worlds. Gamers appear to be accepting of cosmetic items, while rejecting those microtransactions that enable performance advantages. Given the importance of identity construction in virtual spaces (Baldwin 2018; Kozinets and Kedzior 2009), this makes sense as the gamer seeks to construct their appearance as they want to be seen. Additionally, this article shows that “achievement” in gameplay must not be due to a gamer’s financial capacity, but to their own virtuosity. Gamers also express their dissent when the microtransactions are demanded for parts of the game that should have been included in the base game to begin with. These instances represent consumer efforts to liberate themselves from hegemony of corporate capitalism in actual reality.

While these market forces may appear to be inescapable, gamers have demonstrated their ability to reject the commodification of certain goods and act against the developer’s hegemony. There exists some desire among gamers to maintain a separation between market logic and their gaming experience. In this respect, although the game industry has already become a significant component of platform capitalism, it is still possible to perceive the virtualities of the game worlds as contested spaces and resistant cultural spheres, and thus, the gameplay and gaming itself as a transformative experience.

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