I Get By With a Little Help From My Friends: Consumer Creativity in Virtual Communities

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This netnographic research explores consumer creativity within social networks in Facebook and Second Life. We seek to extend the current understanding of consumer creativity beyond the problem-solving, individual-centric definition predominant in consumer research, as we demonstrate that creativity is as much a cultural and social as it is a psychological event (Csikszentmihalyi 2006). Creativity in such sites is an ongoing and collaborative process and we seek to establish how creativity is defined in such sites, what prompts consumer creativity in these sites, what potential outcomes does this altered conceptualization of creativity offer, and what value do these creative consumers offer to managers and marketing professionals.

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SYMPOSIUM SUMMARY
Production and Reproduction of Consumer Culture in Virtual Communities
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SESSION OVERVIEW

The emergence of consumer culture is rooted in the fact that consumption became a central facet of modern life. In order to understand consumer behavior in contemporary society it is necessary to explore the myriad consumer practices through which consumer culture is (re)produced. Such practices can be studied on the individual, societal or institutional levels, and consumer culture can also be viewed as both a material consequence and a symbolic representation of consumer actions. Many of the most recent and significant developments within consumer culture have been Internet-related phenomena such as online brand communities, social networking sites and consumer-inhabited virtual worlds. In this session we explore issues pertaining to the (re)production of a consumer culture by looking at consumer-constructed virtual identities, new interactive contexts of brand-consumer relationships and alternative regimes of materiality present in digital environments. Following is a presentation of the main themes covered in this symposium:

Online Identity Performance and Maintenance

As evidenced by previous research (e.g. Turkle 1995; Markham 1998) virtual environments represent a potent stage for identity construction and identity play. Much like in the offline world, consumers use marketplace resources such as brands and ideologies to represent their *Selves* online. Schau and Gilly (2003) for instance, demonstrate how consumers use brands and hyperlinks to create multiple non-linear cyber self-representations. However, recent developments in social networking sites (SNSs) and virtual worlds have presented consumers with myriad of other opportunities to pursue their virtual identity projects. Consumers online act as cultural bricoleurs mixing and matching different forms of digital cultural resources in order to create narratives of their identity. Consumer-generated as well as market-produced content constitutes the core of popular web platforms such as YouTube or Second Life. These examples attest to the significance of understanding consumer behavior in virtual environments, hence this track explores different practices that consumers employ to orient themselves in a new virtual reality.

Mapping Out Digital Materiality

Non-physical aspects of consumption play increasingly important roles in many facets of the economy, including production (i.e. as evident in the Post-Fordist shift from structured manufacturing to flexible, information-driven service industries), but also in the constitution of brand value (Arvidsson 2006), and of commodity value (which has become ever more dependent on non-material components such as aesthetics). The valorization of product and service experiences as means to achieving competitive advantage serves as a good illustration of this process (e.g. Pine and Gilmore 1999). In addition, the notions of the society of spectacle (Debord 1994[1967]) and hyperreality (Baudrillard 1983[1970]) demonstrate how the non-material composition of consumption is reflected in the fact that consumers frequently encounter products only in the form of mediated representations such as marketing communications (advertising), or other pop-culture outlets (TV shows, magazines). Moreover, in the information economy, even the traditionally tangible processes of production are increasingly governed by non-material functions involving knowledge, science, expertise, systems, planning and cybernetic skills. Contemporary consumption can be characterized by growing dematerialization of objects and commodities (Slater 1997). Taking as a starting point digital materiality of the virtual world (i.e. *Second Life*) we problematize new *materialities* which are beginning to dominate our contemporary culture.

Understanding the Impact of Consumer-Generated Content for Cultivating the Brand-Consumer Relationship in the Marketplace

Consumer-generated content on the Internet provides abundant and valuable resources for marketers and brands to better understand current consumer practices and to more accurately predict emergent ones. The new technology not only provides an expanding array of platforms on which consumers can share their opinions and concerns, but it also facilitates closer and more engaging ongoing relationships between consumers and brands (Cova and Pace 2006; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). Within this relationship the consumer is more empowered and granted a more influential and active voice in the process of brand-meaning construction and (re)positioning (Muniz and Schau 2005). Moreover, in virtual communities such as *Second Life* and social networking sites (SNSs) like *Facebook*, self-organizing consumers are (re)producing consumer culture through individual and multi-level group interactions. In many instances, brands and other marketplace symbols can play important roles in developing and reinforcing individual consumer identities, and in providing substance for online consumer community formation. Current consumer practices in the virtual world create new opportunities for marketers and their brands to activate consumers and engage them in brand-consumer relationships beyond the existing website-based brand communities.

Changing Socialscapes as the result of the Intersection between Offline and Online Reality

Since the emergence of the Internet we have seen a steady extension of consumption into new digital domains as consumers are living more and more of their lives online. Tremendous amounts of time online are spent on activities such as shopping, social-networking, gaming, socializing, dating and working. Social networking sites (SNSs) such as *Facebook*, *Myspace* and *Bebo*, and virtual worlds such as *Second Life*, have in recent years grown to become some of the most important sites for consumer interactivity (largely self-organized) on the web. Many online consumer activities are now being enacted on the burgeoning range of virtual worlds and SNSs, which have become powerful vehicles for self presentation, impression management, friendship performance and relationship management (boyd and Ellison 2007). We explore how consumers use different digital cultural resources in SNSs and virtual worlds to such ends, as well as to investigate how they facilitate the continuous convergence of online and offline consumer social relationships. As these sites have become an indispensable part of our society, we seek to illustrate how the boundaries between offline and online realities merge.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

"I Get by with a Little Help from My Friends: Consumer Creativity in Virtual Communities"

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The market offers myriad opportunities for consumers' creative expression, from how they appropriate cultural and marketplace resources for their identity projects (Holt 2002; Holt and Thompson 2004), how they actively localize the global (e.g. Kjeldgaard and Askegaard 2006) to how they re-imagine consumption spaces and play within them (Kozinets et al. 2004). However, the topic of consumer creativity has not been the core focus of these studies. Instead, the majority of extant consumer creativity research has been focused on consumer creativity in problem-solving contexts (e.g. Burroughs and Mick 2004; Hirschman 1980).

In one of the first and most enduringly influential studies on the topic, Hirschman (1980) defined consumer creativity as "the problem-solving capability possessed by an individual that may be applied toward solving consumption–related problems" (p.286). Subsequent consumer creativity studies have closely adhered to that early conceptualization, wherein consumers are creative when they are required to respond to an impediment in a problem-solving context: when a problem arises, and no preexisting solution exists, the consumer must creatively construct a solution (Burroughs and Mick 2004; Dahl and Moreau 2002; Hirschman 1983; Moreau and Dahl 2005; Ridgway and Price 1994). Recent contributions in this vein include depiction of how analogical thinking by consumers facilitates originality in concept ideation and design (Dahl and Moreau 2002), and how input constraints influence the way in which consumers process information during a creative task and can lead to instances of increased creativity (Moreau and Dahl 2005). Additionally, Burroughs and Mick (2004) investigated antecedents to and consequences of creative consumption. Their findings showed that two person-based antecedents (metaphoric thinking ability and locus of control) and two situation-based antecedents (situational involvement and time constraints) influence creative consumption, and the consequence of higher levels of creativity in response to a consumption problem leads to increased positive affect, including feelings of increased accomplishment, satisfaction, pride and confidence (Burroughs and Mick 2004).

Although varied in focus and scope extant consumer creativity studies share two other interrelated features beyond the common problem-solving perspective. Firstly, the overwhelming focus in consumer creativity is on consumers' cognitive processes during the creative undertaking (Dahl, Chattopadhyay and Gorn 1999; Moreau and Dahl 2005). Secondly, the overarching focus of this research stream has been on the single consumer as a creative individual, and analyses within it concentrated on the inputs and outcomes of a consumer's particularized creative endeavors (e.g. Burroughs and Mick 2004; Moreau and Dahl 2005).

In our present study we seek to extend the notion of consumer creativity beyond that which is conventional in consumer research as we move from a predominantly individual-focused view of consumer creativity to one that more adequately accounts for dynamic and social aspects of the creative process (Berkun 2007; Csikszentmihalyi 1996, 2006; Gruber 1974; John-Steiner 1997). Indeed sociocultural approaches to examining creativity and creative lives are commonplace in other disciplines as "[researchers] became increasingly constrained by theories that limited them to an individual focus (John-Steiner 1997, p. xviii). As Csikszentmihalyi (2006) highlights, psychologists tend to see creativity exclusively as a mental process, but creativity is as much a cultural and social as it is a psychological event, and what we call creativity is not the product of atomized individuals, but of social systems making judgments about individual's products.

In a departure from individual-centric consumer creativity research, we focus on creativity as manifest in more interactive social settings to investigate how consumer creativity is expressed at a communal level in the rich social contexts of the virtual world *Second Life*. In so doing, we also demonstrate that consumer creativity transgresses reactively responding to encountered obstacles (Collins and Amabile 1999). *Second Life* is a site of immense creativity in which consumers are actively encouraged and enabled to create their own applications and experiences through the provision of user-friendly creative tools and templates. Creativity is no longer the sole purvey of those with highly developed web design skills (Ondrejka 2007), but is notionally available to all users. Users create the entirety of the world in action. Moreover, collaboration is commonplace within this virtual spaces as consumers collectively generate information and create digital artefacts (Evans 2007; Ondrejka 2007).

In this study we draw on Csikszentmihalyi's (2006) theory of creativity. In his conceptualization, creativity is a process that can be observed where individuals, domains (a cultural, or symbolic, aspect of the environment) and fields (social aspects of the environment) interact. By adopting this perspective we seek to address some of the following: what constitutes consumer creativity within interactive virtual worlds; what motivates consumer creativity within these worlds; what are the consequences of this altered conceptualization of creativity for understanding consumer behavior; and what are the implications of these creative consumer networks to companies in general (e.g. Tapscott and Williams 2006).

In pursuing the goal of this study, we employ netographic methods (Kozinets 2002) which examines consumer creative practices online. Netnography necessitates an ongoing deep engagement within the context of study (Kozinets 2002). Data used for this project comprised Blog postings on the official *Second Life Forum* and more than six months of in-world participant observation.

Through this study we hope to stimulate discussion and present a research agenda for those interested in consumer creativity and virtual communities from a sociocultural perspective, as well as to shed some insight on the adoption of SNSs and virtual worlds play in consumer creativity.

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"Mapping Out Digital Materiality–Insights for Consumer Research"

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Theorizations of materiality are central to the cultural understanding of consumer behavior, thus much of researchers' interest has been devoted to studying subject-object relations in different contexts such as material possession attachment (Schultz Kleine and Mezel Baker 2004), extended-self (Belk 1988), or object meanings (Richins 1994). The importance of materiality for consumer research is hinging on the notion that objects take active part in a subject's identity construction, therefore consumer selves can be transformed, created, expressed, or emancipated in relation to objects and contexts in consumer culture (Borgerson 2005). In other words, the consumer 'self' emerges through consumption practices and the objects involved in them, and consumption is a process through which human beings materialize or objectify values and meanings, resolve conflicts and paradoxes (Miller 1987).

To date, however, theorizations of materiality in consumer research have predominantly assumed the physicality (tangibility) of the object of consumption neglecting growing dematerialization of consumables accompanied by the development of technology (Slater 1997). This is a considerable omission given that the advent and proliferation of the internet has resulted in digitized equivalents of books, photographs and music encroaching on the realm of everyday consumption and exposing consumers to a new regime of materiality. Many goods which were once tangible have now lost their physical referent and become accessible solely as representations. With few exceptions (e.g. Siddiqui and Turley 2006) consequences of such process for consumer research remain largely unexplored. As also noted in the previous literature, an inquiry into materiality must expand to encompass various dimensions of change brought about by technology (Sherry 2000). Therefore, this paper introduces and problematizes the notion of digital materiality as an altered regime of materiality observable in a virtual world.

In building an understanding of digital materiality this conceptualization benefits from evidence gathered during a netnographic study (Kozinets 2002) conducted in *Second Life* over the period of four months. *Second Life* is an online three-dimensional virtual world where elements of reality merge with fantasy and its residents live their virtual lives through animated represen-

tations called avatars. Being highly immersive, this environment represents a lively consumption space that is home to all possible manifestations of consumerism such as consumer activism, resistance and consumer creativity. Existence in *Second Life* can be conceived of as an exemplar of hyperreality where members of the culture realize, construct and live the simulation (Firat and Venkatesh 1995). The distinctive value of *Second Life* as a site of this inquiry stems from the fact that it epitomizes the idea of digital materiality, as not only is the object of consumption is digitized and intangible, but the consuming subject as avatar is also an intangible representation in the virtual world.

This paper delineates the concept of digital materiality in three steps. First, in order to position the concept within the context of consumer research, it reviews other consumption phenomena that entail a non-material object of consumption such as consumer fantasies (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; Martin 2004), consumption dreams (d'Astous and Deschênes 2005) and vicarious exploration (Stell and Paden 1999). Research, in which the tangibility of consumption objects has been transcended, has conventionally looked at symbolic aspects of consumption or aspects of consumer fantasy and imagination. In those cases, however the non-material object of consumption usually has a physical referent that can act as a locus for the meaning. Objects in digital materiality differ significantly, as even though they might have their physical referents, they do not require them in order to exist.

Second, in order to illustrate the significance of digital materiality for consumers this study adopts a symbolic interactionist view of material identity while analyzing the meaning of consumption practices and experiences in *Second Life*. In this perspective, possessions as material symbols of identity can exist in three types of social reality (Dittmar 1992). Objective social reality is conceptualized as the objective world existing outside of the individual, i.e. objects posses 'hard' quantitative and various qualitative characteristics. Next, symbolic social reality consists of any form of symbolic expression of the world in which we live in and encompasses three important symbol systems of language, non-verbal communication and material objects (which can symbolically communicate the personal qualities of individuals). When both objective and symbolic worlds are internalized a subjective social reality is created and represented as each individual's awareness and understanding. Simplifying, it can be said that symbolic social reality represents a societal level of analysis while subjective social reality corresponds to an individual level.

Finally, by bringing in evidence from other fields such as library studies (Manoff 2006) and visual arts (Sasson 2004) this investigation exposes "the tactile fallacy". This is the logical fallacy to treat objects of consumption within digital materiality as being immaterial instead of intangible. Data gathered *in situ* also support the deconstruction of false dichotomies such as virtual versus real in terms of consumption experiences in *Second Life*. One of the major findings indicates that consumers perceive their consumption in *Second Life* as real because they interpret this lived experience within the context of the virtual world. In other words, their subjectivity moved along the confines of digital materiality.

This study addresses recent concerns in conceptualizing materiality in consumer research which resulted from the proliferation of the internet and information technologies in consumers' daily lives. By introducing and delineating the notion of digital materiality as an alternative regime of materiality as experienced by consumers in a virtual world, this research aims to sensitize researchers to careful conceptualizations of different aspects of non-material consumption.

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"Virtually Me: Youth Consumers and Their Online Identities"

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Identity exploration is an essential developmental task for adolescents (Erikson 1963; Harter 1999; Marcia 1993). Tradition-

ally, it was family and friends who served as a reference for identity exploration. Today, the internet affords adolescents many new and exciting opportunities to experiment with their identities (Katz and Rice 2002; Rheingold 1993; Smith and Kollock 1999; Stern 2004; Subrahmanyam, Smahel and Greenfield 2006; Turkle 1995). Online experimentation often occurs both in the presence, and with the aid of people they have never, and may never meet in the real world. Technologies like social networking sites (e.g. Facebook), chat rooms and blogs receive the majority of attention. However, much of the real action actually takes place in sophisticated virtual worlds such as MTV's The Virtual Hills, Gaia Online and Kaneva.

Individuals enter virtual worlds in the form of *avatars*–online digital personas that they create. In these worlds they socialize with each other, play games, watch videos, shop and tryout different personas. Participation rates are staggering–Habbo Hotel targets 13 -18 year olds and boasts over 100 million registered users and over 10 million unique users each month (Sulake Coproration 2008). Gaia Online attracts more than 5 million unique visitors each month with 500,000 of their members logging in for an average of *two hours per day* (Gaia Interactive Inc 2008). By 2011 an estimated 53% of children and teen internet users will be experimenting with their virtual selves in these environments ("*Kids*" 2007).

As today's youth effortlessly move back and forth between their real and virtual environments, we can only imagine the ramifications for identity formation. These virtual playgrounds allow for experimentation and self exploration at an extraordinary level of realism. Experimenting with possible selves (see Markus and Nurius 1989) can be undertaken in a short period of time, in a relatively safe environment, with minimal effort and little or no expense.

To date a small number of researchers have investigated the relationship between online identity and offline social comparison and self concept, but with mixed results (see Caplan 2005; Harman, Hansen, Cochran and Lindsey 2005; Matsuba, 2006). The most recent study by Valkenburg and Jochen (2008) examined adolescents who use the internet for chat or instant messaging. Their findings revealed that 50 percent of users are motivated to engage in internet-based identity experiments to satisfy their desire for self-exploration (to investigate how others react), social compensation (to overcome shyness) and social facilitation (to facilitate relationship formation).

The purpose of this study is to examine, motivation for in-world participation, the potential impact and influence these virtual playgrounds have on youth identity formation (real and virtual) and how the residents of these worlds function as a reference group. To explore these issues we choose to complete a netnographic (online ethnography) study (see Kozinets 1998, 2002) of popular teenage virtual worlds. Our first step involved developing a list of specific research questions and identifying appropriate virtual environments for investigation. *MTV Network* currently operates eight teenage virtual worlds. We selected two worlds that exhibit high levels of traffic and between member interactions –*Virtual Laguna Beach* and *The Virtual Hills*.

The second step was to have our researchers join and fully participate in both of these worlds on a regular basis. Three researchers engaged in over 5 hours of virtual world familiarization/orientation. They then spent over 16 hours (1 hour per day, at various times of the day and night over a 2 month period) observing in-world behavior and taking reflective/introspective field notes and photographs. Finally they completed 7 in-world interviews with in-world residents. The reported age of respondents was 15-21 and each interview lasted 45-60 minutes. Data was first analyzed independently by each researcher and then jointly to identify major

findings based on frequency of occurrence (between and within subjects).

Motivation for participation included meeting real and virtual friends, to escape real life or find a better one, and to behave in a way that they cannot, or do not feel comfortable doing in real life. We observed a significant amount of role playing with many people owning more than one avatar, sometimes with different personas. Residents verbally and behaviorally adopt the persona of their avatar. For instance, one person was dressed in "country" attire (wearing denim and boots) and started a conversation with "Hey ya'll." Five of the seven people interviewed indicated that their avatar appearance was partially based on acceptance–the need to belong. Furthermore, screen names are commonly used to express a desirable aspect of the self (e.g. Nakedsurfgod)

In terms of identity formation possessions (virtual cars, clothing etc) are used as signals and symbolic representations of real or ideal selves. Groups of similar looking avatars tend to hang out together and are generally less friendly than groups of avatars with diverse appearances. It appears that a unified appearance acts as a code signifying membership to a specific group and members of these "in-groups" are very intolerant of new people (referred to as Noobs) who are usually recognizable by their standardized appearance and wardrobe. Furthermore, they use ridicule (bullying) as a way of setting boundaries for group membership.

All of the residents interviewed alluded to the fact that they are less confident in the real world and the environment gave them the confidence to express themselves. Several commented that they see themselves as being more outgoing in-world and in some cases this virtual confidence gives them real life confidence.

In conclusion we find that in virtual environments identity and acceptance is very important and owning the right assortment of virtual possessions is essential for fitting in. Just as in the real world a social ranking system exists and virtual bullying is common. These virtual worlds give people greater freedom and confidence to act out without any serious repercussions. Future research should 1. Explore the role of brands and how products are used to form and manage impressions of the self 2. Examine how in-world relationships are developed, how they differ from, and how they impact relationships found in the real-world, 3. Examine the relationship between identity formation via virtual worlds and psychological well-being.

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"Pursuit of the Sacred in the Era of Infantilization: A Multi-sited Ethnography of Online Gaming in China"

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Most studies of online gaming and virtual communities have focused on identities issues and examined how the virtual world has offered unprecedented opportunities for reconstructing identities (Castronova 2005, 2007; Meadows 2008). In this paper, we take a different approach and examine how online gaming has contributed to and reflected the infantilization of society, through a netnographic inquiry of the sacred and profane in online gaming (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989; Barber 2007). From American *kidults*, German *Nesthocker*, Italian *Mamoone*, Japanese *Freeter*, to Indian *Zippies* and French *Tanguy,* a rising infantilist ethos that encourages and legitimizes childishness is gaining momentum around the world. This market-generated infantilization induces puerility in adults and preserves a sense of childishness in children trying to grow up. An infantilist culture prefers play over work, instant gratification over long-term satisfaction, feeling over reason, picture over word, easy over hard, simple over complex, and fast over slow. The infantilization of society is tied closely to the demands of a global economy and its ethos has become the major ideology sustaining consumer capitalism (Barber 2007). However, the nature, causes, and consequences of infantilization have only been examined within Western societies. China's rise toward the most populated consumer society offers an unprecedented opportunity to examine this thesis, especially when the one-child policy has left hundreds of millions of families with their focus on the needs of little emperors (Jing 2000).

One of the most significant findings in consumer research is the sacred and profane evoked by consumption (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989).The sacred is the opposite to what is ordinary and part of everyday life, and it refers to what is extraordinary and significant. The sacred is often beyond rationalization and can only be comprehended through devotion. It evokes momentary ecstatic experiences, in which one temporarily feels he or she stands outside his or her self. Anything could become sacred and sacredness is an investment process, in which consumers actively seek to separate ordinary objects from the world of the profane and to create sacred meanings in their lives (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989). A material object can be sacralized through ritual, pilgrimage, quintessence, gift-giving, collecting, inheritance, and external sanction. However, these previously studied processes of sacralization focus on the transformation of existing material objects or places into the sacred. They emphasize having and being as a mode of experiencing the sacred. Although it has been noted that the investment of labor plays an important role in transforming the ordinary into the sacred, and how such experiences can become sacred is not explored. It is also unclear whether or not consumers' gaming experiences in the virtual world can be sacred and if so, whether or not the sacralization of intangible virtual possessions takes similar trajectories. We seek to address these theoretical gaps with netnographic inquiries of the online gaming in China, and within Barber's framework of an infantilized society (Barber 2007).

We conducted depth-interviews with both experienced and amateur gamers in urban China during our multisited ethnographic fieldwork from December 2006 to December 2007. We talked to gamers in Internet Cafes, their homes, game sweatshops, and cafes where they often gathered. We interviewed thirty five informants, including not only gamers, but also game developers, reporters covering the game for newspapers, and managers of Internet Cafes. Our research sites covered a wide region in both southern and northern China, and both coastal areas and inner cities, including Beijing, Changchun, Guangzhou, Nanjing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen. Our informants ranged from fifteen-year old teenagers and to adults in their late 40s. Some were affluent young consumers whereas others were poor and played the game in order to sell virtual possessions to make a living. This diversity of different gamers helps to enrich our understanding of what it means to participate in the game world. The interviews started with grand tour questions about personal background, interests, history of online gamine, life objects, and then were followed by questions about gaming experiences (McCracken 1988; Thompson 1997). The interviews lasted from forty-five minutes to three hours. All interviews were digitally recorded and supplemented by extensive field notes, photographs of gamers playing in Internet Café, and videos of on-site observation. They were then transcribed and analyzed through a systematic and iterate process (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994; Spiggle 1994). Each individual interview was taken as an idiographic illustration of a culturally shared system of meanings, similar to previous research (e.g. Holt 2002; Mick and Buhl 1992; Thompson 1997). Initial analysis has generated rich insights about the virtual world of online gaming that we will present at the symposium.

The marketplace has long been associated with a carnivalesque atmosphere, fantastic and sensuous experience, and with the possibility of magical self-transformation through purchase in a fluid and anonymous social setting (Lears 1994). In China, the popularity of

online gaming has contributed to the creation of a carnivalesque culture (Twitchell 1992), in which communist creed that represses play in the name of self-sacrifice and hard work has been replaced with the new consumerist ethos that encourages playfulness and an obsession with youthful spontaneity and rebellion as also seen in Western society's theme parks, shopping malls, urban architecture, and advertising (Barber 2007). Accompanying the rise of consumerism there is often a sense of loss (Giddens 1991), and a yearning for the sacred (Ritzer 1999), for which consumption is celebrated as a form of compensation. Online games provide an ideal arena in which gamers can experience an idealized past and the sacred lost. Different games emphasize different values and offer a wide range of psychological remedies for everyday problems faced by Chinese gamers. The variety of experiences sought after in online games goes well beyond excitement, novelty, and relaxation. Although appearing profane and unimportant to others, the avatar's sacredness undoubtedly manifests itself to its creator and many gamers we interviewed. Online gaming is a play of conflicting values that offer psychological remedies for a lost sense of achievement and other desirable values in real world. Online games constitute a liminal space through which gamers seek a transcendental sacred experience and in which the rite of passage of identity cultivation takes place in the new tribal society (Maffesoli 1996).

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