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Digital Play and the Actualization of the Consumer Imagination

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Abstract
In this article, the authors consider emerging consumer practices in digital virtual spaces. Building on constructions of consumer behavior as both a sense-making activity and a resource for the construction of daydreams, as well as anthropological readings of performance, the authors speculate that many performances during digital play are products of consumer fantasy. The authors develop an interpretation of the relationship between the real and the virtual that is better equipped to understand the movement between consumer daydreams and those practices actualized in the material and now also in digital virtual reality. The authors argue that digital virtual performances present opportunities for liminoid transformations through inversions, speculations, and playfulness acted out in aesthetic dramas. To illustrate, the authors consider specific examples of the theatrical productions available to consumers in digital spaces, highlighting the consumer imagination that feeds them, the performances they produce, and the potential for transformation in consumer-players.

Hero has a nice big house in the Metaverse, but has to share a 20-by-30 in Reality. (p. 24)

The Street is always garish and brilliant, like Las Vegas freed from constraints of physics and finance. (p. 24)

If you've just gotten out of bed, your avatar can still be wearing beautiful cloths and professionally applied makeup. (p. 34)

—Neal Stephenson, *Snow Crash* (1992)

In Neal Stephenson's novel *Snow Crash* (1992), two worlds are described: the material world and a "metaverse." The metaverse is a huge, global, digital simulation where inhabitants of the material world go for recreation. Stephenson's material world is presented as a dystopian parody of American consumer culture where all space and acts are owned by corporations. But far from being a separate, utopian space where the problems of the real world are forgotten and inhabitants enjoy hedonistic, virtual lives of abundance, the metaverse is *also* structured as an extreme parody of a consumer society.

Although it may not be immediately obvious why individuals should want to spend time in a virtual world so closely modeled on a material society that has been criticized for its focus on consumption, in some respects Stephenson's speculation about the worlds we might build in virtual reality can now be seen in digital games and on the Internet. It is now possible to experience numerous virtual-reality simulations of commodities and consumption experiences.

Consumers can savor buying, customizing, and driving a "real" car in video games (for example, Gran Turismo, Sega GT, Metropolis Street Racer, or Need for Speed Underground), build a virtual dream home (for example, The Sims, Habbo Hotel, or Second Life), or even enhance their digital lives with rare and expensive magic artifacts (for example, Morrowind, Everquest, or World of Warcraft). There are also developments in marketing practice that have resulted in brands being found in an increasing number of digital simulations. These include PC/console games (Lindstrom, 2001; Nelson, 2002), online Flash-based "advergames" (Snider, 2002), and options to customize virtual representations of products and services on brand Web sites (for example, see the BMW site, the Dell site, or Expedia). Other companies allow consumers to collect digital virtual representations of goods in a "wish list" that may be saved and revisited (see Topshop, Amazon, or the "watching" function on eBay). The combined result of these developments is that there are now many opportunities for individuals to engage with a wide range of digitally simulated consumption experiences.

However, digital virtual consumption is deprived of material substance. Its popularity therefore defies the premises of utility-based explanations of consumer behaviour (e.g., a virtual car cannot take you to work; a virtual home does not keep you warm and sheltered). Therefore, "classical" theories of consumption based on rational needs or economic utility (for example, see Firat & Dholakia's [1998] explanation) cannot easily account for virtual consumption. New explanations for these simulations of consumption are required to explain why people might find these experiences engaging and to understand the implications of these experiences for evolving consumer culture. Although there has been speculation about the economic exchange between simulated worlds and real life (for example, see Castronova, 2003), and also comparisons of social and cultural capital exchange between material and virtual domains (see Malaby, 2006), the *desire* to engage with virtual consumption activities is

not well accounted for. We might start by considering the nature of experiences that are not real (in the material sense) and are not imaginary (in the sense of being only in the mind). We will argue that they may be aesthetic performances that emerge from consumers' imaginations and from the inability of consumers to actualize these fantasies through material consumption practices. The outcome of these aesthetic dramas, acted out in virtual spaces, is the potential for social change. Digital virtual reality has already been described as a "liminoid" space, somewhere between mundane, material reality, and speculative imagination (Shields, 2000), and therefore consistent with Turner's (1982) original explanation of a liminoid as a place of inversion for the purpose of transformation. This suggests that activities in virtual spaces are a type of reflective performance that recognizes a deepness in play that elevates it above the normal Western dismissal of play as superficial and frivolous and therefore of little consequence for the serious business of life (see Sutton-Smith, 1997).

Introducing performance as a metaphor to observe virtual consumption focuses on the iterative movement of practices between the imagination and action and provides new insight into many of the experiences that individuals have in digital virtual environments where there are no material objects present. We look at how the "doing with" purpose is rehearsed in the mind and then performed in order for a cultivation of meanings to take place. We also aim to demonstrate that imaginative consumption-play takes place in a wide range of digital theaters outside the confines of material consumption spaces (malls and shopping centers), such as packaged video games *and* online stores, therefore demonstrating that playful, virtual consumption is more pervasive than even the rapid rise in video game use might suggest.

Consumption, Performance, and the Imagination
Performance is a contested concept (see Carlson, 1996); exact definitions are accepted as elusive. Likewise, consumption itself has produced distinctive and separate explanations that survive as contrasting perspectives rather than compete as universal truths (see Gabriel & Lang, 1995). Here we are therefore necessarily selective in dealing with both and connecting the two. We start by considering literature that concentrates on the imaginary and reflective qualities of consumption to illustrate the role of consumption practices in giving meaning to events by actualizing the imaginary. Several streams of consumer research challenge constructions of consumption as utility-maximizing enterprise and favor instead its symbolic, culture-making role.

For Csikszentmihalyi (in Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; see also Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), goods enable an understanding of the self by providing symbolic containers for social relations. Goods occupy in the mind what would otherwise be an intolerable vagueness of purpose; they become anchors for human consciousness.

Similarly, Douglas and Isherwood's (1979) exploration of the social meaning of things concludes that consumption is an activity that is good for thinking. Douglas and Isherwood's (p. 43) thesis explores consumption as "a ritual process whose primary function is to make sense of an inchoate flux of events" through the fixing of social meaning. The consumption of goods as sense-making activity is related to the making visible of abstract cultural categories. Much consumption is an ongoing performance of agreed rituals. For example, Douglas and Isherwood explored how differences in occasion (the everyday, the special meeting, and the annual celebration) may be marked with

different food and its presentation. The food and the way it is served prompt specific performances which, when agreed
by all present, mark a distinction between ordinary and special time. In this way, imagined events are made real through performance with specific goods.

Of course as meaning is always (re-)created in individual events, it is also open to renegotiation and change. If we consider these ideas in light of performance theory, we might see goods as props that are used by consumers in the creation of everyday social dramas. In Schechner's (1988) terms, these consumer acts are restored behavior. Goods are used to "capture" and negotiate consumers' ever-changing and restless speculations about themselves and their social relationships with others in repeated rituals. In doing so, they give consumers a sense of reality against which free-floating, imaginative thoughts and energies stand. It is not so much the physical presence of goods that serves this purpose, but rather the acts that may be performed with and around them and that they therefore come to symbolize. The performance with goods actually captures the imagination and makes it concrete.

An extension of this relationship between imaginative speculation and actualization through consumer practices is also found in Campbell's (2004) recent exploration of the metaphysical dimensions of consumption and his *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (Campbell, 1987). For Campbell, shopping facilitates a monitoring of likes and dislikes of objects found in the marketplace, and through this "testing," individuals achieve a realization of who they are through the evocation of the imaginary and the pleasures that are associated with the crafting of pleasurable daydreams. In this case, the realization of "me" is enacted through choices that are created and first rehearsed in the mind—in the imagination—and are then actualized through *doing*—the acts of looking, browsing, and sometimes buying as a reflective practice. More broadly, daydreaming as an activity that helps us to deal with routine by imagining the future is dealt with by Cohen and Taylor (2004), who invited us to consider the importance of our hidden, imaginary experiences as ways of dealing with routine by imagining something else. They also highlighted that although daydreams are individually crafted, they are based on a stock of fantasies that are socially produced.

Elsewhere, the extent and complexity of consumers' capacity to conjure whole dream worlds is revealed in McCracken's (1988) thesis of displaced meaning. McCracken's elaboration of how cultural meaning is displaced to imagined safe locations articulates goods as vessels of cultural meaning through which "individuals anticipate the possession of the good and, with this good, the possession of certain ideal circumstances" (p. 110). McCracken's consumers create ideal worlds for themselves, perhaps in the past, perhaps the future, or even in some faraway and exotic location. Consumption then takes on the role of confirming the existence of these daydreams. This latter practice is also considered by Urry (1995), who highlighted, for example, that for tourists the experience of a place is always a re-experience because they have first consumed that location in their imaginations.

Another way of viewing Urry's consumers is as performers acting out the fantasies that they have already elaborated in their imaginations. Together, then, these authors and others (for example, Featherstone, 1991) highlight consumption as an increasingly aesthetic, reflective, and highly pleasurable

experience but also one that has the potential to produce individual and therefore collective social change.

More than this, in capturing the crucial role of consumption in the life of individuals, these theories also highlight consumption as a key resource for the imagination and therefore for daydreams that lead to desire and a subsequent motivation to act in ways to realize that desire. A result is that we might see consumption practices not *just* as a set of standardized rituals that give permanence to life but also as a form of ritual evoking and exorcising of desire by Western populations with each cycle of imagination, desire, and actualization providing opportunity for transformation. Consumers use consumption acts both to fix meaning (as in Douglas and Isherwood, 1979) and to explore new meanings (as seems more apparent in Campbell, 1987, 2004, and in McCracken, 1988).

In relying on consumption activity for the actualization of the speculative imagination, both McCracken (1988) and Campbell (2004) suggested that changes in market offerings are produced as a result of the market trying to "keep up" with consumers' imagination. McCracken recognized the world of goods as both a resource for continuity *and* significantly as a site of potential change. Campbell's consumers are capable of producing desire for that which is not immediately accessible, but which they then demand the market at least attempt to satisfy, thus encouraging developments in market offering. In other words, consumers now seem drawn to endlessly imagine novelty and then seek to make these desires happen through the market. However, for Campbell (1987) especially and implied by others, the term *daydream* is given a special meaning in contrast to *fantasy*. Commodities and consumption experiences (such as holidays) are a fertile ground for daydreams because there is at least some reasonable possibility that we could actualize them. Fantasies, on the other hand, are considered by Campbell to relate to much more speculative ideas that cannot ever be actualized, even with unlimited wealth. The result is that fantasy is usually fleeting. But perhaps another result, not explicitly dealt with by theories of consumption, is that the media may serve as a space where such fantasies *may* be "dealt with," and therefore one of their roles may be to allow us to come to terms with desires that we cannot hope will be actualized in the material world. We now consider the potential role of the digital virtual in the actualization of these consumer fantasies.

Digital Play and Transformational Performance
The understanding of how fanciful scenarios conjured up in consumers' imaginations can be actualized through performances staged in the marketplace advances a specific relationship between market offerings and the imagination. For Campbell (2004), the market becomes a mechanism for the encouragement and subsequent satisfaction of desire-laden consumer daydreams. Collectively through their daydreams, consumers literally wish into existence the experiences that they subsequently consume. The media in general, including digital virtual spaces, are themselves subject to market mechanisms (for example, see Kline, Dyer-Witheford, & de Peuter, 2003); they too are created by a negotiation between consumers and commercial organizations. So what kinds of imaginations might virtual spaces serve, and what types of performances might then be encouraged and satisfied? Turkle (1995) suggested that their significance is dramatic; life on the screen permits us to project ourselves into our own dramas, dramas in which we are producer, director, and star. . . . Computer screens are the new location for our fantasies,

both erotic and intellectual. We are using life on computer screens to become comfortable with new ways of thinking. (p. 149) Shields (2003) also advocated a direct relationship between the real and the imagined where the latter is a type of "ideality that must be performed" (p. 4). Shields's summary and analysis surrounding the relationship between the virtual and the real stands as a helpful starting point for beginning to understand the impact of the digital virtual on the process of actualizing consumer desire. Building on Bergson, Deleuze, and Lefebvre, Shields (2003) presented a matrix that conceptualizes the material (or concrete) *and* the virtual (the imagination, dreams, or memory) as real and opposed to the abstract and probable as possible. Whereas the virtual and abstract are ideal, the material and the probable are actual. This "ontological tetrology" (see Figure 1) serves to highlight the potential pitfalls of creating a dichotomy between the real and the virtual, which turn out not to be opposite but simply different ontological positions that are related to each other. Others have also questioned the priority normally given to the material world as real, making the real more akin to what is natural and the virtual merely an illusion or the copy (see Burbules, 2004; Doel & Clarke, 1999; Grang, Grang, & May, 1999; Malaby, 2006; Proulx & Latzko- Toth, 2000; Shields, 2003). Burbules (2004) wrote that such separation, although apparently simple and unproblematic, forgets that "any reality we inhabit is to some extent actively filtered, interpreted or made" (p. 163). We might add to this imagined and performed, both of which are opposed to our *possible*, speculative fantasies and actions.

So, we have things that exist in the imaginary striving to be performed in material space (often through acts of consumption) but now also the potential for digital virtual performances (Shields, 2000, 2003). For example, the desire-laden daydream of buying a car is real, but ideal. It exists, but only in the virtual (in the mind). However, this example is also *actually possible*. The actually possible sets a barrier on the daydreams of consumers (although they may stretch this to its limit). The practice of buying this car (in a material sense) is *actually real*; that is, it is realized and actualized in a performance of a prior daydream in the mind of a consumer. The development of the digital virtual (for example, a video game such as World of Warcraft), however, may invite an individual to "buy" a virtual magic staff. A magic staff is an abstract *ideal*. It is still real when it is imagined by an individual, but there is never the probability of material ownership. However, when performed through digital play this *idealized reality* may seem to be actualized. The staff comes to exist neither entirely in the imagination nor in a material sense, but in an in-between position.

A player of World of Warcraft may actually own a magic staff. In this way, abstract, possible ideals can be made real in the virtual and then actualized by playing a video game or other interactive media. So here we have a mechanism for the actualization of abstract consumer fantasy beyond what is probable, that is, available in the material marketplace.

Although the hyperreal dimensions of a reality transfigured and bettered by media images has been subjected to some scrutiny (see Baudrillard, 1994), here we conceptualize digital virtual spaces not in terms of some loss to or copy of reality but as spaces that emanate from and realize the imagination. As with other thematic spaces, for example, those provided by themed shopping malls or Las Vegas and described by Gottdiener (2000), digital virtual space is intelligible and real because it is the experience of performing in them (as

player or consumer) that makes them real. Driving a virtual car or using a magic staff are significant not because they are phantasmagorical copies of the real but because there is a performance element that concretizes that event as something that is no longer just imagined but *actually* happened.

There is then still an issue of "connections" between these new experiences in digital virtual spaces and experiences in the material world (that have already happened or are yet to happen). What might it mean for material consumption practices that individuals are able to actualize more elaborate fantasy in this way? According to Proulx and Latzko-Toth (2000, p. 6), the real is a conception "in which the actual and the virtual are in a circular productive relationship.

	Real	*Possible*
Ideal	**Virtual**	**Abstract**
Actual	**Material (concrete)**	**Probable**

Figure 1
Ontological Tetrology
Source: Based on Shields (2000).

"Their evaluation of virtual communities is one that is steeped in the potential for transformation. Likewise, Shields (2003) presented this as a key thematic thread to his theorization of performing virtualites, where the digital virtual is a performative matrix through which ideals are enacted and actualized and new modes of being experimented with, potentially supporting new cultural formations. Just as performance in material consumption acts creates meaning by actualizing the imagination, so too can virtual performances. In this regard digital spaces and the Web in particular have been described as zones of "free experimentation" (see Shields, 2003; Turkle, 1995). But we shall argue that "free" is perhaps not the most accurate explanation. Turkle (1995) highlighted that engagement with simulations allows a deeper understanding of that which is modelled (in her example the workings of a society via the game Sim City). Gee (2003) also explained this role of simulation in terms of learning. Gee highlights how digital games create "projective identities." These new identities, which may be an inversion of that which is normally adopted, allow for a new perspective and therefore a deeper reflection on that which is experienced in the simulation. Likewise, Frasca (2003) demonstrated that experimental "what ifs" experienced in games can allow players to understand and reflect on complex issues in new ways.

This process reminds us and Shields (2003) of the liminoid described by Victor Turner (1982) and therefore presents the possibility that virtual spaces may serve as places for aesthetic dramas that reflect and also feed into the social lives of individuals and are not just an outlet for fantasy. Before elaborating on this, it may be useful to consider further the nature of the liminoid and the relationship between aesthetic and social drama that has been articulated in performance theory. We shall see that much of what performance theory suggests is consistent with the role we have already articulated for consumption practices. In Turner (1982), actualization appears where he stresses that "to perform is to complete a more or less involved process rather than a single deed, it is about bringing to

completion, it is to accomplish" (p. 101). Schechner (1988) also considered performance a following through, but he further described a process whereby fantasies are produced by the blocking of "displays." Humans may wish to react immediately to stimuli but are prevented from doing so because of normal and accepted conventions of behavior (which we might also see as the accepted and permitted conventions of our consumer culture).

Instead, then, they may develop speculative fantasies that combine with other ideas floating in the imagination and eventually find an outlet in acceptable behaviors, often in defined spaces such as the theater that have evolved for such a purpose. So for Schechner, these aesthetic performances are a "public dreaming," a way to express through behavior that which has been developed in the imagination, but in ways acceptable to others in society. We might see this as plugging a gap left by Campbell's (1987, 2004) dismissal of fantasy. If for Campbell, fantasy is rejected in favor of daydreams that are possible, what happens to them? The answer is that they remain but seek outlet in "aesthetic possibles." Aesthetic performance then has a "management role" in allowing individuals to imagine, actualize, and then come to terms with ideas that cannot easily find outlet in everyday social acts. These performances are saturated with consciousness that goes beyond just *doing* unthinkingly (see Carlson, 1996). There is reflection, purpose, and potential transformation in aesthetic performance, because in the distance that separates the doing from the thinking, there is a kind of double consciousness. Richard Bauman (as cited in Carlson, 1996) explained this as a mental comparison between the actual execution of an action compared to an ideal or potential. In this respect, performance is again an action that is considered and imagined first and therefore acquires a reflexive constituent that makes it possible to reflect not only on the act but about oneself (Turner, 1982, 1986).

The process of the management of change through performance is perhaps best captured in Turner's (1982) explanation of the liminal. Turner observed and described the various transformations required in pre-modern societies. He noted that the periods of change were often accompanied by ritualized (performative) periods and/or spaces. The role of these liminal spaces was to maintain the ordered coherence of society by managing change. These periods included the "rites of passage" from boy to man or single to married as well as transitions from one season to the next, each event creating its own ritual complete with symbolic goods and performances. This anthropological framework is perhaps not surprisingly consistent with Douglas and Isherwood's (1979) explanation of the role served by goods in regulating relationships and events. Turner observed certain characteristics that were common to the liminal such as the inversion of roles, the removal of the individuals involved from the ordinary and the usual, and the participation of the whole of the society. Although something of the liminal may still exist in modern societies (consider the still formal and ritualized processes of a wedding, Christmas, or even a dinner party), Turner argues that these formal spaces have been replaced by far more fragmented and individualized liminoid (liminal-like) events.

The liminoid differs from the liminal in that it is freer: more an outcome of choice and participation. In pre-modern societies, the liminal was an obligation; in modern times, the liminoid is a matter of free will. The liminoid is observed as moments of individual change or disorder, although the aggregate impact of many individual transformations may result in changes to society as new practices and ideas are generated, consistent, for example with the way that

McCracken (1988) explained the uptake of counterculture by marketers to rejuvenate the market. This also marks the other key distinction Turner made between liminal and liminoid: Although the liminal serves to maintain order in society, the fragmented, idiosyncratic disorder of the liminoid often serves as a critique or opposition to existing structures. This individualized and speculative disorder also seems much more similar to Campbell's (2004) observation that society's structures have fragmented and the grounding of identity in religion, occupation, or even nationality has become undermined, leaving consumption as a key activity for self-reflection and discovery. So performance anthropology, like theories of the consumer imagination, sees consumption acts as both potentially ordering and potentially disruptive of that order through performances that either confirm social meaning or challenge that meaning but adds the possibility of aesthetic performance to social actions.

Turner (1982) also suggested a pattern to ways in which both "social dramas" and "aesthetic dramas" produce liminal change: breach (the creation or emergence of a flaw in social norms), crisis (the coming to a head of that flaw that requires action), redressive action (to "mend" the flaw), and finally reintegration (the acceptance of new order), or schism (coming to terms with the ongoing breach). So rather than just a general claim about the potential for liminal change, we have a detailed structure to the process of change. Turner (1982) and Schechner (1988) agreed that everyday social dramas and aesthetic dramas feed into each other. It is what is "behind" the action in social dramas that is the stimulus for the aesthetic form as acceptable outlets for blocked display. Aesthetic dramas are therefore an acting out, or seeing through, of "difficult" issues in society. For this reason, liminoid spaces are often seen as the arts in Western society (for example, the vicarious performance of TV, film, or theater).

The outcome of aesthetic drama is insight that invisibly feeds back into society. So in social dramas we make use of the experience of aesthetic dramas and vice versa. If the digital virtual as a space is constituted as a liminoid one, then it is a space where change is encouraged, enacted, and then come to terms with via dramatic performances. And in a society structured around consumption as a main resource for individual daydreams and fantasy, and where fantasy is continuously encouraged by the media, it is likely that it is issues relating to consumption that are frequently "worked out" in the aesthetic dramas afforded by digital spaces. Of course, this is to conceptualize material as social and virtual as theatrical. It may be that such a distinction is increasingly arbitrary, but the iterative connection remains with performances in each space reflecting each other. This may be just another way of expressing the post-modern idea that the grounding of behavior and thought in something that may be considered authentic and real is becoming elusive with different "manufactured" experiences now only referring to reach other.

In summary, individuals have long enjoyed consumption not as the rational acquisition of material goods but as a resource for speculation and imagination and the pleasures these can bring. In consumption acts, there is the opportunity for order but also for endless "little" transformations produced by the inversions, speculations, and ultimately playfulness of something that might usefully be called liminoid and, through these consumers, continuously attempt to create and fix meaning by use of consumption experiences. The rapid development of digital virtual spaces has opened up considerable new

opportunities for these sorts of transformations and therefore new performances based on wider consumer speculation: fantasies rather than "mundane" daydreams. What we are only just able to see and document are the range of new practices and reflections that these spaces are allowing, and we now consider these in more detail.

Digital Play and Aesthetic Drama
In reviewing consumer performances in the digital virtual, we look for signs of their role as an aesthetic drama, that is, the actualization of fantasies created by an inability of individuals to experience these things in their everyday social lives. We also speculate over how these new practices may interact with material consumption practice. Consistent with the issues that we have raised so far, we consider four aspects of evolving practices: the nature of the consumer imagination that invites an acting out in digital spaces; examples of stages, props, and productions that are presented for online consumers to perform with; a range of transgressions, inversions, and roles that consumers are invited to adopt; and the ways in which online performance may feed back into everyday life. We deliberately expand our examples beyond prepackaged digital games as the most obvious digital place-spaces to highlight the broader potential that digital media have to allow aesthetic drama.

Blocked Consumer Performances
We have suggested that marketing is a process of facilitating the development of elaborate daydreams that consumers are invited to actualize through the performance of shopping and other consumption practices but that consumers endlessly imagine "more" than they can immediately achieve (Campbell, 1987; McCracken, 1988). Of course, instant credit and relative wealth may mean that purchase of even the exotic may now be routine (for example, see Scitovsky, 1976). The availability of so much may therefore push the speculative imagination into extreme directions. Mundane daydreams may easily give way to displaced fantasies with a subsequent demand that they be satisfied in some way. Some consumers may long for a large home, designer furniture, and all the latest technology. In other cases they may long for a lifestyle that they cannot have because they lack the skills or social connections, and they thus cultivate daydreams of being a race driver, an astronaut, or a famous football player.

Elsewhere, goods may be desired because they are impossibly rare. For example, McCracken (1988) sees collector behavior as just such a strategy for the wealthy (but this now includes many in the West) who come to desire the old, the collectible, and especially the unusual. The media may also invite private speculation about criminal lifestyles by presenting glamorous events in police and other dramas. Here there may be other consumption activities (prostitution, drugs, theft of luxury goods) that are taboo, that cannot be openly practiced (performed), but that might encourage fantasy in the jaded consumer. The popularity of science fiction and fantasy in the media may even invite consumers to fantasize about even more amazing and improbable experiences, especially when combined with the pleasurable nostalgia of childhood fairytales. Together, these are all examples of desires to act that may not find immediate outlets. They may therefore produce blocked performances that consumers subsequently look to the market to help them actualize. Just as Kline et al. (2003) suggested that digital games may be an "ideal" commodity form, we might suggest that their development is driven by consumers "wishing into existence" ever more elaborate, but acceptable, outlets for fantastic desires and by the market responding to as well as

stimulating these desires. Digital virtual performances then evolve in response to the extremes of consumer fantasy that are blocked (i.e., cannot be actualized) in material consumption.

Digital Stages, Props, and Productions for Consumer Performances
When we write about digital virtual reality, we are of course not conceptualizing one other reality but rather the potential for many other liminoid spaces. Some of these may be more obvious than others because they are contained and packaged as theatrical sets where consumers are invited into a prestaged drama. The most salient examples are video games; however, there are also other sites for consumer performance.

These include the online parallels to the staged consumer theaters found in the material word: shops, markets, and malls. What they might have in common is that they are identifiable, separate spaces (stages) with predefined productions suggested (although each performance might be unique). They may also have clearly defined props: special items that have a specific purpose as part of a performance. For example, a chair in a theatrical play is not provided in case an actor gets tired, but it may be a vital part of a performance (an item to "hit" someone with, or to trip over, or to hide behind, etc.).

Likewise, the items in many digital virtual spaces are not simply used but are performed with and therefore give meaning to the event. The result is that digital virtual spaces (stages) and virtual commodities (props) may encourage framed but unique performances that allow for an actualization (release through performance) of the desire built up by consumers' imaginations. An obvious example of a game that allows consumers to actualize their consumer fantasies through online performance is The Sims, and much has been written about this form of virtualized consumerism (e.g., Kline et al., 2003) as an outlet for fantasy (e.g., Consalvo, 2003). The Sims first allows a player to construct his or her own urban theater. A player may choose a family, a home, and even construct a whole neighborhood in which to act out theatrical dramas. Within the game, commodities serve specific purposes. They are the resources around which drama is created. They interact with players by influencing their development and sustaining their psychological well-being. Their accumulation allows players to know how far they have progressed in the game and how well they are going. Their collection may also become an objective, a purpose to the game—something a player can imagine doing in future play—so it is apparent that the theater created out of The Sims is a reflection of the themes underlying the everyday lives of consumers. This theater is a reflection of social drama, worked out on a digital stage.

If we consider games such as the Grand Theft Auto series, on the other hand, we can see the way that a different aspect of consumer culture is turned into aesthetic production, ready for individualized performances. The stage is a city much like ones that we can imagine exist in the United States as a result of many TV and film dramas. We know this city is a grubby, crime-ridden place, and we know that the only way to flourish in such a place is to become a successful criminal. To aid our criminal performances, we are provided props. These include various weapons that we may use to get money (which is itself a prop in that it can only be spent within the context of the production).

We may also use a range of vehicles, many with specific attributes and their own implied dramas (a police car, a taxi, and a fire tender). These goods therefore all have special purpose in the performance. They cannot be used in any material sense, and their use is even limited within the game to specific performances (consider what a gun or a vehicle can and cannot destroy in the game, for example). They are also framed by existing social drama; or rather they may be a reflection of existing theatrical (TV and film) drama, which is itself a reflection of social drama.

More extreme still might be fantasy games such as Halo or World of Warcraft. Here the consumer imagination is fed by science and by legend: the future, the past, and the other place, all identified as sources of displaced meaning by McCracken (1988).
Again, the creation of fantasy is prompted by other media (science fiction and fantasy novels and films). Further evidence for this is the "making real" through games of the imagined worlds in books and films such as *The Lord of The Rings* and the *Star Wars* films. Even in these new worlds, we see goods as props: a ring, a wand, a light saber, and so on. If consumers wish for these to be real, if they create fantasies out of them that demand to be actualized, games allow for a working out of these desires.

We can even see a staging of drama in online shops such as eBay, a vast marketplace that according to a BBC report, now has more than 150 million users (Plummer, 2005). eBay is divided into sections where individuals are invited into separate performances. They may be invited to browse a virtual marketplace, endlessly searching for the exotic or unusual, but they may also enter into a competitive drama with other players by bidding on items. Alternatively, they may enter a space where they are invited to become a seller, to create their own ads or even whole shops. And finally, they are invited to review the performance of others. In this instance, the props are the items that are bought and sold—or rather they are the digital representations of such items. It might be worth considering that the majority of the performance on eBay will not involve the transfer of money and goods. Not all browsing, bidding, and offers for sale lead to material transactions. We might also consider the growth in "spoof" items that are created on eBay where they become real. These include a haunted video games console, a time machine, and even a soul (see http://www.whattheheck.com). These staged, theatrical spaces complete with elaborate props then become the resource for creative, reflective performance. If it cannot exist in the real world, or if it can but you cannot afford to own it, the fantasy of existence and even potential ownership can be sustained for at least as long as an auction lasts.

Inversions and Transgressions in Digital Consumer Theater
The aesthetic dramas that individuals are invited to take part in online and in video games frequently involve subject positions and actions that might be very different from those in the material world. Individuals may assume a different gender, they may become wealthier, and they may acquire special skills. These include specialist knowledge, for example, in the use of guns and other specialist equipment; physical skills, such as strength, dexterity, or endurance; even paranormal skills, such as various types of magic; or as Malaby (2006) explained, new forms of cultural capital. They may also engage in behaviors that would not be socially acceptable in the material world. They may have affairs, they may steal, and they may kill. But these are "as if" role-plays. They may reflect social experiences, modified by the imagination, but

they do not involve material bloodshed, for example. They are therefore like the deaths in films or on stage, virtual and aesthetic in nature. Nevertheless, there are also more subtle inversions and transgressions available in online spaces that more obviously reflect consumer culture. For example, consumers may manufacture and sell their own fantastic commodities; a buyer may become a seller; a reader of reviews may write a review as a journalist; and consumers of advertising may produce their own ads. Like the differential status of individuals in Neal Stephenson's (1992) novel *Snow Crash*, The Sims creates a "metaverse" where players can act as if they are wealthy and successful. They may choose from a range of subject positions and construct families that do not exist in the material world (but they may also construct families just like theirs in the material world). From this creation a variety of theatrical dramas may be created, including death, affairs, marriages, children, careers, and so on. Inversions and transgressions may be even more apparent in Grand Theft Auto.

Largely law-abiding citizens may become serious criminals. Men who love their wives may sleep with prostitutes (and even murder them for money) and drivers whose material encounters with the police may be restricted to speed cameras may become embroiled in dangerous police chases and shootouts, so that the dreams we have about a new sports car that rarely become true in the material world can be explored in digital spaces. Just as The Sims allows a poor-to-rich inversion, successful entrepreneurs and professionals may become taxi and delivery drivers and so on in Grand Theft Auto. If shopping is one outlet for desire that has been displaced, then games such as Grand Theft Auto provide a wide range of alternative escapes for bottled-up desires. And the limitations of social acceptability need not apply when desires are unleashed in these performances (although such games may not quite yet be socially acceptable, at least they are private). Similarly, fantasy games allow for the construction of different subjectivities through the adoption of a different gender or race or by having improbable skills such as the ability to fly or do magic. Such performances might invite ridicule in the material world (outside that other liminoid space, the science fiction conference). For example, note how funny "starwars kid" (the popular online viral film of a teenager pretending to wield a light saber; see Kehney, 2003) is considered to be, and yet similar performances within games do not invite such reaction because they are framed within a place-space rather than within "normal" social conventions of behavior.

Compared to this, the inversions available to an eBay user seem mild, but perhaps their closeness to the everyday material world of the performers makes them significant in a different way (and it seems that even top-selling games such as Grand Theft Auto cannot attract the numbers found browsing eBay on a daily basis). The eBay player gets to explore potentially endless commodities, many of which evoke nostalgic reminiscences of golden eras or speak to desirable future plans. For example, collectors may see before them on eBay a collection beyond their wildest dreams. They may even bid, temporarily owning, even if they fail to win at the end. Others may act out entrepreneurial performances, writing creative copy for the items and art directing their own ads. All eBayers may adopt an onscreen name, often reflecting an aspect of themselves that remains hidden in everyday life.

The result of all of this is that tensions created by consumer imagination, itself fueled by the market and the media, may be acted out in these spaces and the consequences then reflected on. The opportunities for elaborate performance in digital virtual space is perhaps much greater and more personal than in other theaters available to the consumer, and the scope for inversion and transgression may allow for much wilder fantasies to be entertained.

Transformations and Reintegration into Everyday Social Drama
The acting out of drama follows a series of stages: the breach, crisis, redressive action, and reintegration (Turner, 1982). A breach must preexist before the drama proper. Perhaps a constant state of breach is an attribute of our restless consumer society, a constant friction, dissatisfaction, and desire for novelty and change that Campbell (1987) suggested we are socialized into and that Featherstone (1991) described as an aestheticization of everyday life. A result is that it may be desirable to enter a virtual space where the normal rules of the material world are to a greater or lesser extent suspended. The booting up of the computer becomes something of a ritual process for removal from the material world and the entering into of a space that will allow for individual transformation. Crisis is built into these spaces. In video games there is collaboration between the designers who have produced scenarios and players who perform them to bring tensions to a head: for example, the focus in The Sims on resolving tensions in relationships between characters or the series of missions that can be performed in Grand Theft Auto. A crisis in eBay is created by the auction structure itself. Each auction is a minor crisis for both buyer and seller. A performer in any of these dramas needs to consider actions (often hinted at, but never finalized) to overcome apparent problems and therefore regain equilibrium within the game.

But this is not a final closure on the performance. Schechner (1988) and Turner (1982) both highlighted the iterative relationship between theatrical and social drama. Social dramas are the feeding grounds for the imagination that produces theatre (the source material for game designers, following careful marketing research), but in turn the reflective qualities of theatrical, virtual performances allow for a greater vocabulary of performance in social, material drama (something like Malaby's [2006] speculation about the transfer of cultural capital across material and virtual domains). Inevitably, the performer in digital spaces must return to the material world (although there is evidence that for some this return is increasingly fleeting; for example, see BBC, 2000, 2005). They do not, however, return from these spaces "empty-handed." They bring with them experiences that may help them to negotiate both social and aesthetic dramas that they subsequently encounter in new ways. How do individuals read advertising after they have written advertising themselves? How do they deal with persuasive sellers when they have experienced being that seller? What sense do they make of the law when they have flagrantly disregarded it and experienced the consequences? What starts to dominate their imagination when material commodities compete with the most fantastic experiences and where so many extreme behaviors are given outlet in performance? The complexity of human experience in both material social dramas and the aesthetic dramas they have performed in digital spaces is unlikely to produce simple answers to these questions, but the anthropology of performance suggests two possibilities: a new, resolved compromise between previous social norms and the reflection of experiences in digital virtual drama, or a split, schism, or opening gulf between perspectives, where experiences in the digital environment become accepted as separate from the material world.

Conclusions
Consumer culture theory indicates two types of performance (doing with goods): the regulating, meaning-making rituals described in detail by Douglas and Isherwood (1979) and the more chaotic, disruptive acting out of daydreams and fantasies, captured by theorists such as Campbell (1987) and McCracken (1988). Together, these patterns link thinking to doing, the ideal to the actual. New digital spaces in particular seem to encourage more chaotic, liminoid change, but we might also recognize that in these new behaviors there is the potential for the establishment of new norms in consumer practices.

Virtual spaces created via new technology have allowed the evolution of new consumer performances based on fantasies that have emerged from social experiences and even from other aesthetic media forms but that have unsatisfactory outlets in the material world. Where the market cannot satisfy the restless consumer desire that it has encouraged through material goods and experiences, a gap is opened that invites consumption experiences that do provide aesthetic outlets for that desire. This has previously meant a focus on media forms such as theater, film, and TV but now includes digital games and other digital place-space. Participation in these spaces may also feed into new desires and subsequent actions. The process is iterative. Individuals who become familiar with digital spaces as potential theaters for aesthetic performance may develop their imaginations along these lines. And like in our material world, and pre-empted by Neal Stephenson's (1992) novel, much of the focus in our consumer culture is on commodities (material or digital virtual) as sources around which the imagination is actualized. A reviewer of this article made us aware that this argument seems a little too close to a "deficit model" popular in media reports about lonely and isolated individuals compensating for their social exclusion through video games. For example, King and Borland (2003) explained how the media used video game play to account for and typify the "unhealthy" fantasies of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold following the Columbine shootings in 1999. More recently, other violent crime has also been attributed to an unhealthy obsession with games; for example, see the BBC's (2004) report of Warran Lebanc's obsession with Manhunt "resulting" in the murder of a 14-year-old or Bradley's (2005) account of the Devin Moore's "acting out" of Grand Theft Auto. It was not our intention to support such discourse about video games but rather to highlight that fantasizing about novel commodities and experiences is an established consumer practice that most in the West indulge in, one that is supported and perhaps enhanced by digital virtual space, and that therefore has the potential for transformation in many players-consumers. Of course, this is also not a complete rejection of the idea that transformations from game play can be negative, if not always as extreme as those that seem to fascinate the media. Taylor (2006), for example, suggested that players of World of Warcraft not only take cultural stereotypes into the game but may also develop (negative) opinions of whole nationalities as a result of play.

In addition to access to a wider range of ever more novel and exciting goods via exotic online stores, consumers may enjoy an ability to act out consumer daydreams in ever more compelling interactive and virtual dramas; they may buy into virtual dreams and fantasies (based on possible ideals) and own virtual goods that they might never possess in a tangible, material way. They may even enter whole new economic worlds where their wealth, status, and abilities differ greatly from their embodied, material being. And they may also transgress, or behave in ways that they may find difficult in their normal,

material "stages" even if this behavior is at least theoretically possible. Digital virtual spaces may have the potential to offer experiences that are more seductive and satisfying than the 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. This reflection of virtual dramas back in material theaters of consumption may already be witnessed in the themed malls described by Gottdiener (2000) or the electronic fantasy sports stores described by Kozinets et al. (2004). All these in-between, transitional spaces allow for the renegotiation of consumption practice. The "rituals" and "symbols" of consumption that constitute the cohesive shared experiences that sustain our existing consumer society may be undergoing a disruption and ongoing modification of what constitutes "normal" consumption that may result in a renegotiation, subtle or dramatic, of the meaning of consumption itself. According to McCracken (1988), this process is always ongoing; the digital virtual is therefore just one dramatic turn in consumer events. The result of the little consumer dramas visited daily in virtual spaces may be an acknowledgement of schism when the virtual becomes accepted as a pleasurable other space where fantasy may be lived out. Alternatively, in the case of virtual goods and experiences that have material equivalents (the actually possible), perhaps there is potential for reintegration through attempts to re-experience the digital virtual in the material: in other words, the seeking out of material experiences similar to those discovered and tested in the virtual. Evidence for such a claim can even be seen in the apparent success of in-game brand placement deals (for example, see Moseley, 2004). In any case, we may be witnessing a further turn toward fantastic and playful consumer practices.

This way of seeing engagement with digital play has the advantage of connecting the digital virtual with the material in ways that avoid the pitfalls of simple effects and also accounts for the attraction and form of much digital play (i.e., it is a fantastic and dramatic acting out of our culture). Although the order-producing aspects of consumer performances may still exist, for example, in the use of specific goods for the marking of time and different events, these virtual consumer performances highlight the locations for many disruptions to established consumer practices, and this makes them an especially important area to understand. Further research may hope to continue to chart these new rituals, in particular the ways in which return from these liminoid spaces may modify other behaviors and market offerings as reintegration.

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