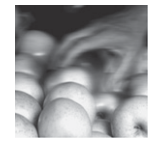

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Video gaming as craft consumption

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Abstract

This article repurposes Campbell's (2005) concept of 'the craft consumer' to generate a new theory of video game consumption, which proposes that we identify the material practices typically associated with craft labour within acts of digital play. We draw on case studies from popular and community-driven video game titles including Dark Souls and Super Mario Maker to make our argument, suggesting that a grasp of the controls initiates material practices, like repetition, which provide the groundwork for craft skill. It is from this position that we argue that consumers initiate a craft-like 'dialogue' (Sennett R (2008) *The Craftsman*. London: Yale University Press.) with the game's design that reveals the experimental and creative nature of video game consumption. Importantly, these case studies provide evidence to meet with Campbell's definition of 'craft consumption' as an (1) 'ensemble activity' and (2) as a 'collection' of handmade things. The result is a better understanding of the consumer as someone who initiates experiences of skilled labour and creative self-expression through the craft of playing a video game. This article presents a new understanding of the (gaming) consumer whilst also challenging the idea that the experience of 'craft consumption' is typically reserved for the middle or professional classes, as Campbell maintains.

Keywords

Consumption, craft, games, skill, creativity

Introduction

In an earlier edition of this journal, Campbell (2005) proposes that social scientists should recognise the existence of consumers who engage in what he terms 'craft consumption' – an

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alternative perspective of the consumer set alongside traditional images of 'the rational hero', 'the dupe' and the 'postmodern identity-seeker'. In this article, we propose that the same is true in the context of video game consumption, where explanations of the video game consumer have tended towards a focus on 'rational pleasure seeking' (Holbrook et al., 1984; Molesworth, 2009), compliant with capitalism and the 'culture industry' (Kirkpatrick, 2013; Wark, 2009) and seeking out new social and cultural identities (Muriel and Crawford, 2018). Like Campbell, we argue that what is missing from these accounts is a discussion of the 'craft' (Sennett, 2008) – the skill, knowledge, judgement and passion – present within acts of video game consumption and what material practices video gaming inaugurates through our use of the controls. Recent decades have seen digital games emerge as a major contemporary media form with widespread reach, cultural impact and vibrant creativity (Crawford et al., 2013; Shaw, 2010; Sharp, 2015), in addition to emerging as the basis of what is generally termed 'game studies', the academic discipline dedicated to their study (Gekker, 2021; Mäyrä and Sotamaa, 2017). In this context, video games have emerged as an important site of study for understanding contemporary consumption patterns, especially in the context of craft. Craft consumption refers to activities in which consumers personalise their products by designing and making what they consume. Campbell distinguishes craft consumption from closely associated practices like 'personalisation' and 'customisation', which he suggests are lacking in the autonomy, creativity and self-expression typically associated with acts of making. Through case studies of the popular video game titles Dark Souls (From Software, 2009–2017) and Super Mario Maker (Nintendo, 2015–2019) we will unpack how the hands acquire skill, generate understanding and express creativity through the producing and consuming of digital artefacts. These games make appropriate case studies due to the strongly community-driven nature of both games: although in both cases now several or even many years old, extremely active communities remain around both games who continually innovate and perfect new ways of playing. In considering these games, we will focus on the material practices of 'repetition', 'modulation' and 'consistency' (Sennett, 2008) present within these forms of consumption to show how video game play has elements of haptic, tacit and reflexive knowledge production. This conceptual account is essential to understanding video game consumer motivations better by generating new insight into the making processes that these consumers engage within, which have become central to the play experiences of video game players. Specifically, two concepts within Campbell's work need revisiting. We will first interrogate his idea that craft consumption is an 'ensemble activity'; that it refers to activities that create new commodities by assembling raw materials by hand. Campbell offers up a range of examples here, from gardening, cooking and building. Likewise, we will argue that handling video game controllers speaks to the earliest stages of the craft consumer process. In particular, we will discuss the process of acquiring craft skills in games through repetitive practice, experimentation and creative discovery. This discussion will reveal a vital aspect of video games consumption: that many 'action role-playing games'[1] (Dark Souls) and 'editor games'[2] (Super Mario Maker) facilitate rewarding labour experiences through creative practice. We will argue that these acts are genuinely and distinctly new, which allows us to differentiate them from Campbell's account of 'personalisation' and 'customisation'. Second, we will consider Cambell's idea that craft consumption is about

the 'collection' of things. Both the Dark Souls and Super Mario Maker games involve acts of preparation, possession and maintenance – rituals – that give video game consumption meaning and significance. These examples will show that consumers relate to video games as collections of handmade objects that they preserve and display as tangible symbols of identity (Molesworth and Denegri-Knott, 2007).

Craft consumption and video games

Campbell proposes the idea of 'craft consumption' as a means of recognising the creative and expressive ways that consumers engage with commodities. He begins with the argument that three images of the consumer have dominated the social science literature on consumption. The first is grounded in economic theory; that of the consumer as an active, calculating and rational actor, who carefully allocates and maximises scarce resources when purchasing goods and services. The second is typical of Marxist writings critical of 'mass society'; that of the consumer as a passive, manipulated and exploited subject of market forces – what Don Slater (1997 cited in Campbell, 2005: 24) refers to as 'the dupe' of modern consumer culture, whose very existence is compelled towards consumerism by capitalist modes of production. The third is more recent and influenced by postmodern philosophy; that of the consumer as an 'identity-seeker', as someone who self-consciously manipulates the symbolic meanings attached to products and selects them to maintain an identity. Campbell argues that these images, which remain today (Bradshaw, 2018), do not adequately cover the range of consumer motivations, nor capture consumer desire to engage in creative acts of self-expression, rather than rational self-interest, coercion or the need to create and maintain a sense of identity. Campbell thus suggests that the 'craft consumer' may act as a guide to better understanding this distinctive mode of consuming and the sovereignty that we can ascribe to consumer agency.

Specifically, Campbell presents an image of the craft consumer as someone who finds creative self-expression through the skilful process of producing new things out of already existing, mass-produced retail commodities. This expression emerges through the application of skill, knowledge, judgement and passion – ideas typically associated with craftsmanship (Sennett, 2008) – and which result in the production of something made and designed by the same person. Campbell singles out cooking, do-it-yourself (DIY) and fashion as examples, suggesting that, in each case, the consumer buys commodities (e.g. ingredients, tools or ready-made clothes) and engages in the 'craft' of creating something more significant than the sum of its parts (e.g. a meal, wardrobe or style). Campbell calls this an 'ensemble activity', and it means that craft consumers are frequently involved in making new connections and producing assemblies of creations that consist of several mass-produced items. The same is true of collecting as an activity. Citing Belk (1995), Campbell suggests that it takes skill, knowledge and creativity to select, acquire and possess things by removing them from typical use and treating them as part of a set of non-identical objects or experiences. In other words, there is an active orientation within collecting, a passionate involvement, which itself constitutes a form of craft consumption – the 'collection' is 'handmade' insofar as one assembles individual products into a 'collection',

thereby situating it within a more substantial creation. This creation is recontextualised and given new meaning and significance. Campbell argues that collecting involves a considerable investment of the 'self' as the collector engages in 'grooming rituals' to effectively construct an ensemble of discrete entities. The products themselves may not be modified in anyway, yet the collector still creates something new, which Campbell argues (2005: 34) draws attention to the 'autotelic' or 'aesthetic dimension' of craft consumption, which 'has a fundamental resemblance to "play"'.

Of course, collections also tell us something new about human subjectivity. According to Baudrillard (1996: 85), when we collect objects, we no longer treat them as material bodies with a functional purpose. Instead, collections become 'mental precincts' through which subjects express their meanings and passions. Indeed, Baudrillard (1996: 85) argues that collections afford subjects the means to (re)construct a private world or a 'totality'. Baudrillard's point is that collections allow subjects to access a much deeper experience – perhaps even spiritual or 'apophatic' (Brock, 2017) – as they confront aspects of (what is lacking or absent in) their subjectivity. This is not to deny the mundane or everyday-nature of collecting. On the contrary, Baudrillard is quick to point out that collecting is as latent and repetitive as the discourse of subjectivity itself – a series of experiences and belongings that deliver us from moments of anxiety. While Campbell's concept has had a significant impact on the field of consumer research, informing topics on 'branding' (Pike, 2009), 'design' (Shove, 2007) and 'fashion' (Crewe, 2013), as well as debates concerning 'prosumption' (Ritzer, 2014), 'co-production' (Beer and Burrows, 2010) and 'DIY cultures' (Wolf and McQuitty 2011), it has received little attention in the studies of video game consumption or digital gameplay (Watkins and Molesworth, 2012). This oversight is significant because, as Shove (2007: 42) argues, Campbell's treatment of consumption enables one to explore the act of consuming as an example of 'craft production' – a type of labour valued by thinkers such as Marx, Veblen and Morris for offering authentic expressions of humanity. This acknowledgement – that 'craft' is an essential aspect of agency and consumer behaviour – is also missing from existing literature on video game consumption, which reproduces these three dominant images of the consumer as a 'rational hero', 'dupe' or 'identity-seeker'. Previous research portrays the video game consumer as a rational or 'cataphatic' thinker, as someone who turns to video games to express the 'virtues of Western modernity' (Mouzelis, 2010 cited in Brock, 2017) through autonomous and controlling acts of virtual avatars. This image has its origins in psychological studies of play, which argue that we derive satisfaction from the 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996) or 'self-determination' (Rigby and Ryan, 2011) of controlling video game characters. It also has its origins in consumer research, which suggests that gameplay provides people with a way to control their emotions positively (Holbrook et al., 1984). In each case, research positions the consumer as a rational subject who chooses video game products to experience control. For example, research suggests that video games act as a resource for the scheduling of consumer 'life-scripts', that is, that they provide players with the virtual materials needed to order and plan their daily routines effectively (Molesworth and Denegri-Knott, 2007). This perspective informs related arguments on video game consumption, which suggest that video games may be used as objects to escape from the routine or mundane aspects of everyday life

(Molesworth, 2009) while also helping consumers to actualise a sense of identity through the accumulation of virtual in-game resources and achievements (Watkins and Molesworth, 2012). This sentiment is also present within discussions of video game culture, which argue that consumers choose games as a way to control their sense of identity. For instance, Molesworth and Watkins (2016) claim that modern consumers, living in uncertain times, consume video games because they offer quick and accessible opportunities for rational self-definition and self-assertion. It is the 'instability' or 'fluidity' of modern identity (Bauman, 2000 cited in Molesworth and Watkins, 2016) that helps to explain why consumers treat video games as objects of 'distinction' (Bourdieu, 1979 cited in Crawford, 2011) or opportunities to establish 'tribal communities' (Maffesoli, 1996 cited in Muriel and Crawford, 2018). In each case, video game consumption is a reasonable attempt to control one's identity.

Critical theorists seize upon this search for control, and ambiguity in consumer identity, to critique video games as characteristic of the modern 'culture industry' (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972). Marxists argue that the design of video games cultivates a false sense of achievement and mastery, thereby encouraging users to reject material culture and to find meaning and success in commodities-cum-virtual-worlds that are rich in status symbolism (Wark, 2009). For example, research suggests that the 'enjoyment' of games works as a 'distraction' and temporary relief from poor working conditions, which prevents the organised rejection of capitalism and exacerbates the achievement criteria that people use to judge 'success' (Bown, 2015). Kirkpatrick (2013) is particularly critical of this aspect of video games, arguing for a 'gamer habitus' and that the very idea of 'playing well' is an example of how consumers internalise the values of free-market capitalism and dissociate themselves if insufficiently ambitious or successful. More recently, research tempers this position by arguing that video game culture(s) represent a range of hegemonic struggles that move beyond class (Mukherjee, 2018). As with Campbell's assessment, past research on video game consumption veers between positions, dividing the activity into accounts of commodities or consumers. This polarity eschews a degree of agency, positioning the video game consumer as either a 'cultural dupe' to promotional hype or a 'hero of (post)modernity', freely and privately exercising their will to control their identities. Cutaway is the creativity and self-expression that resides in effacing these divisions and finding the 'craft' within video game consumption.

Video gaming as a craft

In recent years, the relationship between digital play and craft has become more apparent as research reflects on the materiality of virtual worlds and examines the acts of repetition, creativity and experimentation that accompany video game play. For example, Liboriussen (2013) draws on Richard Sennett's definition of craft, that is, 'the desire to do a job well for its own sake', to argue that video game play has at least two qualities that can be considered examples of craftsmanship. Firstly, Liboriuseen argues that videogaming, like any craft, entails a 'material consciousness' (2013: 282) that emerges as players rehearse actions to achieve goals. He suggests that video games typically ask players to

undertake tasks that require them to manipulate the 'malleable material' of virtual worlds to solve puzzles or meet objectives. Liboriussen's point, which Keogh (2018) echoes, is that video games require players to establish repertoires of bodily movement, thereby having the same ontological quality as any labour experience that rewards patient rehearsal.

Liboriussen's second point is that video game play entails the satisfaction of seeing the result of one's labour, regardless of whether it is considered 'useful' or 'productive' within a capitalist marketplace. He draws an equivalency between craft and video game play based on the understanding that both are autotelic activities; they are ends in themselves, rather than actions guided by market values, such as efficiency or utility. For Liboriussen, this motivation presents a tentative resistance to the objectified character of contemporary working conditions. Video game players, like craftspeople, are considered 'free' to develop their material consciousness as video game environments afford the materials (and tools) needed to labour in pleasurable and creative ways. Nørgård (2011) also writes of this 'joy of doing' things in video games as evidence of its relationship to craft labour. Examining a variety of games, Nørgård argues that the pleasure of gameplay emerges as players establish bodily connections to games through player-actions. More specifically, it is through the process of incorporating video game controls, interfaces and avatars into players' 'body schemas' (Merleau-Ponty, 1945 cited in Nørgård, 2011) that video gaming becomes a profoundly engaging and expressive craft. Nørgård (2011: 13) cites Sennett (2008: 130) to make this case, 'I made this, I am here, in this work', suggesting that agency resides in game*play* because of the physical connections that are needed to make player-actions happen. In this vein, it has been noted that games consumption takes the form of 'co-creation' within digital gaming communities. For example, the practice of modifying or 'modding' games is central to player participation in game design and game practices (Hong, 2013). This leads to 'gamer-made designs' (Sotamaa, 2010: 240) for how a game should be played, sometimes distinct from the designer-intended play. As Sihvonen (2011: 40) notes, such game participation involves both 'self-expression' and 'creating and sharing one's outputs', two elements we will return to later in this article.

More recently, the first author has traced the 'craft' of playing video games to the dexterous movement of a player's hands and the connection that this has to the experiences of skilled labour (Brock and Fraser, 2018). The author examines how this definition of skill applies to video gaming practices: that is, how the play of digital games involves a 'dialogue' between the player's hands, the controls and the enablements and constraints of a game's design, such that, with practice, players feel that they can make something well. The first author elaborates on this position by observing how a player's hands manoeuvre around video game controls, mainly as they practice and experiment with different 'styles' or approaches to multiplayer challenges, arguing that the capacity to 'grasp' the controls reflects a range of skills, from tactile contact through to the analytical judgement and experimentation with objects and materials. These arguments reveal that there is a working understanding of the relationship between video games and craftsmanship. This understanding stresses the embodied-cognitive connections that emerge as players interact with video game controllers, interfaces, puzzles and challenges. What is crucial about these arguments is that they recognise that self-expression emerges as

players labour to incorporate an understanding of the game's design into their body schema. The grasp of the controls reveals the earliest experiences of agency in video game play. As Griffin (2007: 1) argues, 'at the centre of the video game experience is the interface… only the controller can lead to action in game space'. In the next section of this article, we use this position to develop Campbell's original thesis – that 'craft' is about producing new things – by considering how players use their bodies to 'make' in video games. More specifically, we evidence how the video game controller/gameplay system acts as a tool for making, mainly as players execute commands to assemble materials and produce new connections between them. Our purpose is to reiterate the existential significance of the body in making things (Sennett, 2008) and why the craft of games consumption is of symbolic importance to players.

Making in games

Super Mario Maker

Our first case study is that of Super Mario Maker (2015) and its sequel Super Mario Maker 2 (2019), which enable players to create and play levels based on design elements from the iconic Super Mario video game franchise (e.g. Super Mario Bros. Super Mario World). In these games, players have access to a set of 'course creation tools' that they use to create the gameplay mechanics and enemy behaviour for each level. These creations typically involve manipulating various in-game objects, from blocks and platforms to warp pipes and power-ups, as well the environment's physics and audiovisual effects. Players quickly learn that these tools work in tandem and use them to create a variety of levels, with near-endless ensembles of challenges and aesthetic features. Once complete, players may share these levels online, where other super mario marker (SMM) owners will play and evaluate their creations. At the time of writing, some 10 million levels exist online, demonstrating the tremendous appeal of user-generated level design as well as the (culture of) craft emerging through these playfully creative experiences (Nintendo of America, 2020).

To identify 'craft consumption' within SMM, we must consider a key ontological point: that in any complex video game system, the use of the controller (and, thus, one's body) to execute a single command readily creates unexpected and emergent outcomes that do not (necessarily) align with the player's intentions. It is to this 'oblique' nature of player–game interactions that video games may afford the experiences of agency, especially as a player labours towards solving puzzles through the development of knowledge and skilful bodily practices (Brock and Fraser, 2018). Here, the resonance with Sennett's (2008: 125) description of craft is stark: SMM level designers are in a 'dialogue with materials', flicking back and forth between creating a small portion of the level, testing that portion, modifying its contents, and then moving onto the next. Although designers can readily plan some aspect of their level, they are always testing out new pieces to see how they 'fit', with the digital materials and tools they deploy stimulating tactile (through 'haptic touch', see Parisi, 2011) and cognitive (through 'puzzles', see Csikszentmihalyi, 1996) responses. Equally, the level designer exercises their agency through choice: they choose what to add (or remove) in the game, aware of

the aesthetic and or functional direction of the project. For each piece that the level designer manipulates, they must come to 'understand the object's limits and possibilities' (Molesworth and Denegri-Knott, 2007: 81). In this regard, the specificity and materiality of the game medium are essential: it is a medium with specific sets of affordances and possibilities, of which the SMM level designer becomes knowledgeable through practice. To elaborate on this point, consider the use of a 'bomb' in SMM. The presence of this tool and the way it interacts with other pieces creates possibilities for its innovative use. Straightforwardly, the tool is an offensive weapon thrown to kill enemies. However, it also has the potential to destroy certain parts of the terrain 'triggering' other in-game mechanics to function, such as opening up a previously inaccessible area of the level. Part of being a skilled SMM level designer is about understanding how these combinations operate to provide players with a range of exciting ways to play through the level. Designers are always learning how to push the materials of the game in new directions (Johnson, 2020), a framing understood within the SMM community to suggest that for the most skilled designers, each level making experience is an opportunity to practice one's craft and discover new ways to use the game's digital materials.

One way to understand this craft, as Sennett (2008: 38–40, 272) suggests, is to identify the practices of 'repetition', 'modulation' and 'consistency' within the activity. In SMM, evidence of 'repetition' is in how level designers come to anticipate the functioning of in-game objects. First, any experienced level designer will develop a habitual knowledge of the qualities of the materials that they work with. That level designers reliably cycle through the 'tool palette', quickly identifying the materials appropriate to the task is of evidence of this habitual knowledge. Level designers learn to anticipate the qualities of materials and objects in SMM, a habitual knowledge that affords them the mental space needed to think creatively (Korn, 2013).

Repetition gives way to 'modulation': skilled level designers experiment with the rhythm of play by modifying the scrolling speed of the level design, the pace of character movement and the track of the accompanying audio. This experimentation affords a range of level design speeds, from fast and intense to slow and gentle, the latter being accessible to newer players who are themselves still developing the habitual knowledge and practices needed to play the game (Keogh, 2018). These practices also speak to the 'consistency' with which designers craft their levels. For example, good designers regularly use 'coins' in their levels to give players 'hints' at what they should do if they run into trouble. Relatedly, designers typically communicate with their players through the practice of drawing the letter 'Z' into the level to denote that the player should spin jump to proceed. This design practice and many others, such as using a down arrow to indicate ducking or using two blocks of different materials in a ceiling area to signify a 'triple jump', are evidence of how the expectations of the SMM community shape the craft of level design. These practices are evidence of the 'shibboleth' of SMM level design; that a given maker understands what it takes to create a level that is 'fit-for-purpose' (Sennett, 2008: 160–161). Another way to understand playing SMM as a craft is to highlight its elements of experimentation and discovery, which is to say, the emergence of new craft possibilities. As Sennett (2008): 178) argues, experimentation is a crucial part of craft labour, beginning with how the hands learn to touch and coordinate with tools and

materials, and culminating in the pushing of boundaries and rules of objects and what they can do. This experimentation has resulted in the creation of some astounding levels. For example, one player has created a calculator from the game's components, able to add or subtract numbers to give correct results (including negative numbers) through a tremendously complex implementation of the game's pieces to serve as stand-ins for logic gates and other essential computing components. By experimenting with which materials trigger 'on/off' switching processes, and add or subtract in-game objects, the designer mirrors the fundamental processes of digital computation in a new form. As well as experimentation, there is also evidence of discovery within SMM, and discovery characterises the creative process, argues Korn (2013: 50). Korn suggests that the process of 'thinking with things' anchors the experience of creativity, mainly as humans discover the world through the immediate and incremental effects that their actions have. The same is true of ludic innovation within SMM. Experienced level designers are continually discovering new tricks with existing tools, learning how to bypass Nintendo's design parameters by inverting the game's controls, or by causing objects to pass through solid walls. Following Korn, the craft present within SMM is not solely an act of problem-solving nor developing a fit-for-purpose methodology. Instead, it concerns the capacity to search out problems and adapt one's habits accordingly. Adaptation is what characterises the creative practice of user-generated level design as designers move beyond repetitive processes to include creative choices that reflect their values. It is all of these material practices that allow us to capture the user-generated level design within SMM as an example of craft consumption. For Campbell (2005: 27), the craft consumer is someone who transforms 'commodities' into personalised (or, as he says, humanised) objects. In SMM, this transformation is through the skill and mastery of the course creation toolkit, which allows players to develop both disciplined practices through repertoires of repetition, modulation and consistency, but also express their creativity through moments of experimentation and discovery. This transformation emerges not just from the selection of pieces (a mental act) but also through the role of the body which selects, rotates, places, manipulates, alters, tests, redesigns and retests. In this sense, agency resides within the (craft) dialogue that the player has with the complexity and unpredictability of level design. As Campbell (2005: 28) notes, agency (for the craft consumer) comes from control over the machine.

Dark Souls

Play as an ensemble activity is also evident in the player-created cultural trend known as 'Fashion Souls'. The idea of Fashion Souls emerged from players of recent games from Japanese developer From Software, beginning with 2009's dark fantasy Demon's Souls and continuing into the dark fantasy Dark Souls series (2009–2017), cosmic horror Bloodborne (2015) and fantastical Japanese alternate-history Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice (2019). Alongside other aspects, these games have become particularly notorious for their extremely high levels of difficulty. 'Fashion Souls', however, has emerged as a subversion of the games' difficulty, with players collecting in-game clothing items as an expression of their aesthetic tastes, and arranging them to produce an amusing or exciting look. Players

are known to then post these creations to appropriate internet forums (e.g. Reddit), where they discuss the ways that particular fashion ensembles highlight features of player character design. In one example, players discuss how a particular ensemble of in-game clothing brings about the features of the player character's eyes and comment on the 'attractiveness' and 'cuteness' of the design (Reddit, 2019a). In another example, a player designs and dresses a character to accurately represent Abraham Lincoln and American fashion in the 19th Century during the Civil War. In response, community members request that the player provide them with the information needed (item names, character creation sliders) to copy this design for themselves (Reddit, 2019b).

What are the aspects of 'craft' here in Fashion Souls? As with SMM, the first is to say that there is evidence of crafting in the process of transforming digital virtual goods into a 'meaningful possession', a desire to 'make it theirs' through the iterative process of doing something with the object and understanding its limits and possibilities (Watkins and Molesworth, 2012). In Dark Souls, this begins with the player directing their in-game character to acts of collecting pieces of in-game clothing. Clothing items are located all over the large labyrinthine and often the difficult-to-navigate game world, meaning that players must execute skill – hard-to-perform precision manoeuvres using the video game controller – to obtain these items. This process requires rapid reflexes, as well as observational and deductive skills to identify patterns in enemy behaviour, but also identify the location of items within the game world. Indeed, it is only through practice (with the controls and interactions with the gameplay environment) that players can begin to express their ownership over digital virtual goods as the very act of collecting clothing within Dark Souls is severe enough as to confer evidence of distinction and attachments amongst the digital virtual goods available in the game. In other words, players make a significant commitment to developing the skills needed to appropriate these items before they can begin to cultivate a fashion.

The process of creating a fashionable ensemble in Dark Souls reveals the lengths of extensive customisation that players will go to make their characters highly personal and unique. Upon finding what might be an item of clothing in these games, the player sees a small sparkling object on the floor, which must be walked over and collected with a button press. This process is the case for all items, but if the item in question is a piece of clothing, it joins other clothing items in the player character's inventory or wardrobe. Once the player has collected some clothing items, they can construct a particular costume, or mix and match to explore different arrangements. To do this, the player cycles through four types of apparel covering different areas of the body – the head, chest, arms and legs. The player also has the option to rotate the camera, and zoom in and out, to view the clothing items from different angles. The player might also put the character into a particular 'pose' (which are also collectable items within the game) to get a sense of the way that these clothing items look. Once the player has settled on the clothing items that they consider a Fashion Souls outfit, the final step is to take a screenshot. This is then captioned, shared on Reddit or another site with a relevant community and becomes a part of the Fashion Souls community. As the example shows, moments of creativity take place as players consider how different clothing items might 'fit' within each item slot to realise their imagined style. Players do not always create fashion from scratch. Within the Dark

Souls community, there are many examples of remixing existing fashion styles from other media formats and realising them through clothing items from within the video games. For example, players might seek out in-game clothing and then combine it in such a way as to echo a well-known superhero character or a real-world political figure. As these examples show, there is an element of creative appropriation taking place here; as fans draw creative inspiration from personalities from TV, film, music, books and other video games and experiment with the existing resources within Dark Souls to create a likeness of them by appropriating their fashion through the in-game clothing and items available to them. As such, the way that fashion work through Dark Souls resembles cosplay communities – groups of fans of games or other media who commit significant time to dress up as their favourite characters. In cosplay, fans 'interpret existing texts, perform them, and extend them with their own narratives and ideas' (Lamerichs, 2011: 2), and the same takes place here. Just as cosplayers 'select a specific character because of their fondness for the character's attitudes and persona' (Rahman et al., 2012: 320), existing fandom commitments or interests often guide the sort of costume to be created. However, it is the players who must find a way to express a familiar look using items not meant for this purpose – that is, clothing in a Soulsborne game. In this way, we can see Fashion Souls as a kind of 'digital cosplay' – it performs many of the same objectives and takes pieces of clothing not intended to be used to construct an individual persona and puts them to that purpose. The sharing of these costumes through forums come to represent, in a sense, digital convention centres, where consumers display their costumes in a digital rather than physical space, still accruing social status in the relevant community. As Winge (2006: 69) argues, 'spectators play an important role in the social settings of cosplay', and this seems to be the case irrespective of the medium. The creative act is satisfying for its own sake, but the display of the creative act is also a vital part of the craft here: players design costumes in Fashion Souls costumes to be seen.

Finally, not all of the crafting activities in Dark Souls are concerned with creating a fashionable output – some are concerned with the organisation and archiving of owned virtual possessions. In Dark Souls alone, there are well over two hundred items of clothing to fit into just these four slots, yielding over seven million costume permutations for the creative player to invent. These possibilities mean that players must develop ways of managing the excessive accumulation of clothing items, that is, finding ways to manage their collections. As Watkins and Molesworth (2012) argue, digital collections are not like traditional collections, with regard to the scarcity and rarity of availability. What prompts the cultivation of digital collections is abundance as digital virtual goods can often be accumulated quickly and in more significant numbers. The associated practices are therefore concerned with how consumers attribute personal significance to processes of establishing an internal hierarchy of valuation such that they can determine what is meaningful within the collection. We can see this process in Dark Souls through observing the level of challenge the game ordinarily presents, the obscurity of the locations of many of these in-game items and the fact that in some cases items are mutually exclusive, thereby requiring multiple sequential playthroughs to acquire. This effort needed to acquire them lends them personal associations of meaning that couples with high-level navigation and knowledge of the game world, as well as a strong commitment to the effort

required to gain all these virtual items. Through these acts of reimagining, consumers 'make the homogenous commodity their own by charging it with personal significance' (Molesworth and Denegri-Knott, 2007: 78), the significance being accrued both through the quest to acquire it, and the construction and visibility that constructing fashionable costumes affords. The experiences of craft change the consumer experience of video games. Habitual knowledge and skilled practices give way to affordances of aesthetic taste and fashion. In Dark Souls, the functional qualities of in-game clothing, in terms of their armour values or unique attributes, become of auxiliary importance. Skilled players establish new associations with these clothing items, treating them as artistic, creative or humorous flourishes. These personal statements typically follow a sufficient level of in-game mastery, contingent on the skills necessary to collect and repurpose in-game items. Crafting a fashion from this collection of items characterises a slight subversion of the game's more instrumental nature. Play becomes about enabling new constellations of visual styling, rather than goal-oriented in-game progression. As such, the craft of collecting items changes the consumer experience for skilled Dark Souls players as they find alternative ways to express themselves.

Video gaming as craft consumption

In this article, we have outlined a new explanation of video game consumption by examining the elements of craft in consumer practices. We started by describing previous attempts to conceptualise video game consumer motivations and argued that these accounts overlook the instances of self-expression that players generate through acts of craft labour. With our first case study, the games Super Mario Maker (2016) and its sequel (2019), we showed how the game's affordances allow for a productive dialogue with materials, repetition, modulation, consistency, experimentation and discovery – all hallmarks of craft labour. Consumers engage with the SMM series as a set of digital materials with which new combinations, structures and experiences can be crafted. At the same time, the ongoing and ever-more intense formulation of expertise amongst its most skilled players highlights the extreme apex to which Super Mario Maker's craftspeople can aspire. With our second case study, that of the "Fashion Souls" practice, we highlighted how play is as an ensemble activity, how players craft in-game virtual items into meaningful possessions and how collection rituals flow through these activities. The transformed meaning of in-game items with their new-found "fashionable" importance serves to engage consumers in an altogether different way of playing the game. Possession rituals signal competitive mastery but also how players choose to subvert the functional aspects of player character clothing. As such, we have charted a new way of explaining video game consumption that, following Campbell, acts as a better guide to understanding consumer agency through the concept of craft. Indeed, we have shown that the experience of craft within video games confers sovereignty to the consumer, which previous accounts overlook. This position is also important to further developing Campbell's original thesis. We disagree with Campbell (2005: 37–39) that craftsmanship can only, or at best, be an experience of the middle or professional classes and that humane, liberating or authentic

creative activities are denied the working classes. On the contrary, gaming is prevalent amongst working-class youth. Research shows that experiences of achievement, hard work and skilled expertise are central to video game consumption amongst young working-class men (Ward, 2014). Equally, many of the most successful and visible video game players hail from working-class backgrounds (Johnson and Woodcock, 2019), while socioeconomically disadvantaged groups more broadly, such as Black or Latino youth within the United States, have long been a mainstay of gaming arcades (Richard and Gray, 2018). As Sennett (2008) maintains, the experience of craft does not belong to those of more privileged backgrounds – the motivation to do a job well for its own sake is without class boundaries. The same is true of craft consumption in its application to video game consumers.

Equally, our arguments here have importance for connecting the sociology of consumption to game studies. We propose this focus on craft labour as a new way to consider notions such as gaming 'skill', 'ability' or 'expertise' and therefore sit alongside phenomenological approaches (Keogh, 2018) as a critical framework for assessing the experience of playing a game, and in particular the experience of developing significant expertise at a game. Especially in an era of 'esports' – professionalised competitive gaming – it is crucial to understand expertise in gaming, and the experiences of players who are becoming famous (or infamous), public or financially successful, as a result of the long-term cultivation of and creativity resulting from their gaming craft. We also note that players' objectives and rewards from these activities appear quite diverse, shedding new light on various activities within gaming culture. In SMM, we see level designers readily creating original, innovative and playful content. In Dark Souls, we see skill mix with creativity, much like in cosplaying, to become an 'outlet for personal expression, performance, and exhibition' (Rahman et al., 2012: 332) that turns ordinary 'digital virtual goods into meaningful possessions' (Molesworth and Denegri-Knott, 2007: 76). What might other phenomena within gaming be a form of craft consumer activity?

In asking this question, we note that craft elements are not limited to the genres we have previously mentioned. Although the *Souls* and *Mario Maker* series are compelling examples of the development of craft, we must also note its existence in more 'mainstream' titles. This is not just in terms of the skill acquired to compete in mainstream titles at a competitive level (Hilvoorde and Pot, 2016), for example, but can also be found in phenomena such as 'challenge runs', in which players attempt to complete games with the addition of new and extremely difficult restrictions (Frushtick, 2019). Although it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that games with unusually large possibility spaces for innovation and varied play have *more* potential for the development of gaming craft as outlined in this article – such as role-playing games and editor games – the phenomenon is *not* limited to these genres. Player creativity serves as a generative force for new forms of play across game genres, and this marks a potentially rich area for a continued enquiry into game consumption.

Indeed, one might consider exploring simulations, which typically have larger possibility spaces, as offering more scope for craft. For example, *Microsoft Flight Simulator, Kerbal Space Programme, Stardew Valley* and *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* are games that should provide bountiful examples of both craft-based skill and/or possession rituals. Alternatively, future research could consider the collecting rituals and cultures that

emerge in augmented reality mobile games, like *Pokémon: Go*, or the constructions of 'digital collections' across digital platforms more widely (Jakobsson, 2011). We note that there is future work to be done here on the role of time in collection activities and its relationship to human subjectivity (Baudrillard, 1996). As such, this new conceptual approach has significant potential for future research into digital consumption by re-framing how we understand the evolving landscape of video gaming. For example, craft might offer us a new and potentially incisive way of examining practices where 'work' or 'labour' on the one hand, and 'play' or 'leisure' on the other hand, meet. Alongside existing formulations such as playbour, gamework, productive play and prosumption, understanding gaming as a craft would allow us to focus more fully on the intrinsic rewards these skilled players experience and the processes by which such striking creativity can emerge out of digital games. Other directions also present themselves. How do theories of craft support our understanding of competitive and or cooperative social behaviours when players must navigate 'blockages' in play (Sennett, 2008: 269–274)? How do theories of craft support our understanding of 'extreme' forms of play practice, where players must harness obsessional energies, to remain competitive? How do theories of craft expand the idea of video game consumption beyond financial or exchange-based understandings? What of the recognition of shared interests in problem-solving and problem-finding and the diverse demographics that craft can draw together? Finally, we also note that the experience of playing digital games for the first time or as a 'beginner' remains critically understudied, and we propose that a craft perspective will shed light on the development processes by which players acquire familiarity. Understanding gameplay as a form of craft has significant potential for understanding game consumers and the appeal(s) of digital play itself, and we intend this article to be a step towards developing a fully realised conception of gaming as a craft.

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Notes

1. Such games generally entail developing the traits and skills of a single character, such as engaging in combat with in-game enemies, collecting or trading items or exploring a world and interacting with digital non-player characters.

2. These games give players a range of 'pieces' or 'elements' they can combine in new ways to create their own in-game levels, challenges and courses, which other players can then experience. They are often but not always 'platformer' games in which player characters in a 2D or 3D world run, jump, dodge enemies and perform precision reflex challenges.

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