

Please send all my loot to the following address:

'E. the Vanquisher, near the Market Square, city of Whiterun,
province of Skyrim, Tamriel'.

Analysing consumption practices in first-person single-player sandbox games.

By Estelle Thunnissen

Table of contents:

1. Introduction
2. Results and Conclusions
 - 2.1. Digital virtual products as game-mechanics
 - 2.2. The material versus the digital virtual.
 - 2.3. Fantasising within a fantasy world
 - 2.4. Your own place in the virtual country
 - 2.5. Playing with identity as game-play
 - 2.6. Making things with your own hands on the controller
3. Discussion

1 Introduction

As you may have guessed the above address is not a place you can get to on public transport or via car. To get there you must own a playstation 3, or a computer, and a copy of Skyrim and Skyrim: Hearth-fire. Even that will not get you to my house though. Because my house only exists on my hard-drive as a specific safe-file. So my house does have a material dimension, a structure on a hard-drive, but it can only be seen and visited in a virtual world. The same goes for all my possessions in the game, that I have spent many hours collecting and stashing and that only I will ever see. Neither the game, nor my house have an obvious social component or function.

It is a shame you can not visit it, I have spent quite a long time building and perfecting my house. When I go to my house I am welcomed by my 'wife', a non-playable character. She greets me and gives me the income from the shop she runs in town. I can then go get some nourishing soup, take a refreshing nap, forge some weapons, make some potions and admire and rearrange my treasure. In my house I have carefully lined up my most impressive weapons, armour and shields on designated furniture. My drawers are full of gems, minerals, flowers, food, wine and mysterious items. Why have I done all this? More to the point, why have millions of other people? What even is a flower in game? Is it a commodity? A symbol? Can you really consume it? How?

My main question is: What is the role of digital virtual goods in a single player game? To answer this question I have done case-studies of the digital virtual objects in Skyrim, Skyrim: Hearth-fire, Dragon Age: Origins, and Fallout. All these games are single-player, offline games, that allow the player to gather loot and buy, sell and use items. Skyrim, Skyrim: Hearthfire, and Fallout 3 also allow players to stash and display stuff, either in a prefab house or in a house you build yourself.

A digital virtual product is defined here as a product that exists halfway between the imagination of the consumer and material reality. It exists in a cyber environment, big or small, online or offline. It includes things like online banking, online shopping and items in game worlds. (Lehdonvirta, 2012). I will look at in-game items, restricted to their specific virtual world and the mind of the consumer. They are confined to the visual dimension and can only be looked at and used in the context of the game. I will not only look at products that cost real or ingame money. Like Lehdonvita (2012) I do not think "money is a necessary feature of consumption" (pp 22). Spending time or effort and investing physically, mentally or emotionally in something are also ways to 'buy' goods and I will look at how this functions in my games. Digital virtual goods have in-game utilitarian uses limited to the virtual world (Lehdonvita, 2012) and more hedonistic uses. I will look at both utilitarian uses and more hedonistic uses of the digital virtual objects in the games.

In the following Results section I will discuss my findings about how the consumption of digital virtual objects works in single-player games, and how this compares to the consumption of material goods.

2 Results

2.1. Digital virtual products as game-mechanics

Items like health potions, magic potions, weapons, shields and lock-pick paraphernalia have a long history in games as a part of game-play (the way in which the game can be completed). As such they have a utilitarian use within the game world. In most games it is necessary to think about them and use them if you want to finish the game. In this way they present a puzzle that has to be solved. What sword is best at this point in the game? For this enemy? How can I use my potions during battle so that I stay alive and win? Molesworth (2012) points out that play in games has a future orientation based on thinking strategically about what is going to happen. This is also how items in the games I have studied function. These games have health and magic items (drugs in the case of fallout) that can be used during battle, and all these games have a huge amount of gear that has different effects on such things as health, strength, hit ratio, amount of damage, type of damage and more. To win the player has to choose the gear that suits his or her character best, and that is best at defeating a particular enemy. This generally results in lugging around more than a normal human could possibly carry. Skyrim, Dragon Age and Fallout 3 have a weight limit and this means that you have to think carefully about what you take and what you leave behind. Some things are rare, or especially useful, others can be sold for a lot of money, others are useless crap. Thinking about your consumption means puzzle solving and is an important game-play mechanic.

A mayor use of loot (things you find or steal) in these games, and games in general, is rewarding players for progress. Loot is usually found at the end of dungeons, or levels, and on the bodies of slain foes. A big boss fight usually means the treasure chamber is not far away. Loot tends to strengthen the sense of achievement after an accomplishment, as does earning a lot of money for completing specific tasks. (welovetheloot.com, 26-03-2014). The player wants to be rewarded for his effort and this reward takes the shape of stuff. It links to the way consumers reward themselves with products in material life. Shopping consumers engage in acts of self-love. They reward themselves for having (not) done something. (Miller, 1998). Buying something in this way makes them feel rewarded and valued and so does getting a glowing magic sword after defeating a ghost in Skyrim.

The player also gains experience point after defeating enemies, these eventually lead to level ups, and level ups give you special points. These points can be spent much like money can, only what you can buy are personal enhancements for your avatar. Skyrim, Dragon Age and fallout all have an elaborate system for upgrading you character physically, mentally and behaviourally. You can enhance basic features like intelligence or stamina, and you can get skills like magic spells, weapon moves, defensive moves, power of persuasion, greater ability to sneak and others. In this way personal development can be gained directly through consumption. This way of thinking is also present in material consumption. When shoppers browse items they receive pleasure from fantasising about their future selves. They imagine themselves as different or better, in connecting with the product they are gazing at. (Lehtonen, 1997).

2.2. Fantasising within a fantasy-world

To play games, or sustain a state of play, players must willingly *suspend their disbelief of the game world*. This mean they accept the premises and rules of the game as if they were natural and self-evident. (Myers, 2012). Because of this attitude it is possible for digital virtual goods to become meaningful to players. That digital virtual products are part of the game mechanic does not mean that there is no dreaming involved in their consumption. Money and points need to be earned, and the games are structured so that in the beginning it is hard to earn enough for a big purchase like an effective weapon. This means that gazing or fantasising about products you might be able to buy in the future is present in these virtual worlds. Lehtonen (1997) writes that being around things is pleasurable because it allows consumers to sway between the real world and a possible world created by the consumer. The same can be said about being around digital virtual objects. For example in fallout when shopping for weapons, you encounter a lot of different types. From shot guns to mini-nukes. This may lead players to imagine nuking something in the game world, cutting up zombies with a flaming shishebab, or becoming untouchable with power armour. Like Molesworth (2012: 61) theorizes, “virtual objects can be a resource for consumer's imagination”.

I think fantasising like this will lead the players to play more, or for longer, to gain more satisfaction through earning game money and to experience pleasure through fantasies and their fulfilment. In shopping in video games the players oscillate between three worlds instead of two: the material, the virtual and the possible. They are simultaneously sitting on the couch, looking at virtual products and fantasising about their future actions in the game world. I conclude being in a virtual world does not exclude fantasising about goods. Indeed I believe it even encourages it.

Presenting new items at stages of the game can keep a game fresh and interesting. It gives

gamers the opportunity to wonder what new and different things are just around the corner of the dungeon. Milesworth (2012: 68) writes: “New weapons and artefacts [...] serve as consumer goodies – players expect lots when they finish a game – and new games must offer new artefacts as objects of potential desire”. The anticipation of loot propels the player onwards through the game. Take this quote from a gamer forum:

This can mean engaging in
activities that appear absurd to outsiders,
like meticulously searching the recently
murdered corpses of countless
foes and opening every single chest,
box, barrel, crate, footlocker, cabinet,
desk, and vending machine we come
across in the hopes that *this time* we'll
find something *really* awesome.”

(Maddigan, <http://www.g4tv.com/thefeed/blog/post/724066/loving-the-loot-the-psychology-of-collecting-stuff/>)

For players like Maddigan, the goal of finishing the game, or of fulfilling certain objectives is not enough incentive to go on, they need the stimulus of anticipation. The brain is wired to monitor the environment and predict reward. When we find something that is even better than we predicted, this makes us feel good. So finding an armour with +7 defence instead of the +3 we expected on the basis of the loot pattern makes us very happy. (www.psychologyofgames.com/2011). When we can predict with accuracy what happens, we get bored. If we had found the +3 armour for instance, we might have stopped playing the game because we got bored. This is an extreme example but I want to show that surprise and novelty in virtual goods is an important part of the gaming experience. Game designers are said to experiment with optimal drop ratio's to make sure their game is satisfying on this consumption level.

2.3. The material versus the virtual

In games the opportunities to create and consume unusual things is are greater than in real life. There is no issue of transport, or of limits of material and technique. If a game world exists, producing an object is relatively easy. All it needs, is to be programmed and made visual.

In the virtual world the consumer generally has more chance to buy and consume than in material life. In material life he or she is limited to the amount of money earned and the effort of

consuming. This is no different in games, but you can earn game money much faster, and you can do it from your couch. Going to shops and using things like food and weapons is also much quicker and takes less physical effort. In real life you would not be able to buy a great sword with earnings from two hours work, or be able to procure it in 5 minutes, but in game worlds you can. In this way consuming in games might be an extension of consuming material products. You can buy more because you can buy in both the virtual and the material world.

This strikes a cord with modern consumers in general because an aspect of modern consumption is that re-enchantment through products ultimately leads to disenchantment. When you buy an object, the enchantment, meaning and enjoyment fades quickly. This prompts the consumer to look for new (types of) products that might re-enchant their lives once again. (Ritzer, 2001). These can be found in the virtual world. Dengri-Knott and Molesworth (2012: 4) write: “One of the reason digital virtual consumption may be compelling is its steady supply of novelty and difference. The domain of material consumption has become a bit too known, too desperately familiar to incite interest. The promise of novelty, in terms of goods [...] seems infinite.” Digital virtual items are ideally suited to re-enchant.

Much of the game items in Skyrim, Dragon Age and Fallout are radically different from what you can buy in a regular shopping mall. A gun that can shoot household objects, an armour made of dragon scales, a magic amulet, are all exotic items in our material world. Exotic products are products that are unusual from the reference point of the viewer, and/or foreign to mainstream culture. Exoticism in material products is found pleasurable by consumers. (Johnston and Baumann, 2007/2013, Warde et al, 1997). I expect the same to be true for digital virtual items. The bizarre nature of items in Skyrim, Fallout and Dragon Age suggests that is. But because a game must be finished, the main goal reached, the side-quest completed, the novelty worn of, eventually consumers will require a new game with even more exotic and different items. Myers (2012: 56) writes that: “Once items are extinguished, that is consumed, their aesthetic appeal cannot be replaced by items from the same game, but only by items from some new and more novel game.” Production and consumption of games and new items for games will I suspect function much the same as its material counterparts: The demand for novelty is never satisfied.

It is not only the fantastical nature of products that re-enchant players/consumers. Molesworth (2012: 60) thinks that players enact the same consumption scripts in games as in the material world, but that “the spectacular virtual environments re-enchants the consumption experience”. Because the worlds of games have so much spectacle and extravaganza (Lehtonen, 1997), they give something extra to consuming within them.

2.4. Your own place in the virtual country

Even ownership of a medieval cottage or a futuristic metal house is an option in Skyrim and Fallout. The add-on for Skyrim called Hearth-fire, also lets the player build his or her own house in the Skyrim universe. According to Lehtonen (1997) shoppers in the material world use shops as an opportunity to create their own private space. In this space they feel free and can be alone without feeling lonely, they are with things, instead of with people. Single-player games give people the same opportunity to be alone without being lonely. In a single-player game one is with things in the form of virtual objects and non-playable characters, in a private virtual world. This world is created by game developers so not completely personal, but then neither is the environment of a store. The store and the game world both facilitate the creation of a personal private space in the mind of the consumer.

But unlike in a store, the games Fallout and Skyrim give you the opportunity to create a visual representation of a personalised private space by letting you build and/or decorate a house. In Skyrim this house can only be entered by you, your partner, children, steward and bard, in fallout only by you. This means that the house is a safe space where players can keep their stuff without the possibility that it is stolen by npc's or deleted by the game. It is also the only space you can be certain that objects stay the way you placed them. In the rest of the game-world things are usually replaced by the game when you restart your save file but at home you can be with your stuff safely and without interruption.

This gives players the option to visually creative in his or her consumption. The building of a house in Hearth-fire also gives you the ability to permanently alter the game world. The already private virtual world of the game can be personalised via the building of a unique house. This might enhance the feeling of privacy, yet because it is a home, keep players from feeling lonely. Being creative through consumption like this, can be a source of enjoyment and meaning for consumers. These consumers are called 'craft consumers' by Molesworth (2012:72) and a main motive of consumption for them is creative achievement in games.

The house has a strategic aspect as well because there you can keep loot that you want to keep but are not able to carry. Contemplating on what effort has gone into getting specific virtual items is a way to transform them into meaningful possessions. (Denegri-Knott and Molesworth, 2012). Storing and displaying objects in a virtual house gives players triggers this transformation and gives more meaning to both the game and the objects. For some people these objects virtual as they are, are also more tangible than the memories attached to them. This makes them want to hang

on to their virtual possession. (Denegri-Knott, Watkins and Wood, 2012).

Lehdonvita (2012) writes that artificially scarce virtual make very good collectables. And Denegri-Knott, Watkins and Wood (2012) found that some consumers take on the role of curator for their virtual goods. In the games I have looked at, certain items are indeed very scarce, and some very hard to obtain. They cannot be bought outside the games, so they require a lot of play hours and investment. In the standard houses available in Skyrim there are special racks to store these rare items. In Fallout your house includes a show cabinet where you can collect 24 rare bobble-head figures that are hidden in the most obscure outposts in the game. Collecting is an option as game-play and can be the source of pleasure of consuming virtual objects.

2.5. Playing with identity as part of game-play

In studies of Second Life and Habbo Hotel researchers have found that part of the enjoyment of the game lies in the fluidity of your physical identity and the ease of changing it. (Vicdan, 2012) This process of playing with identity through consumption has also been observed in studies of material culture. Current studies like those of Collin (2007), van der Laan and Velthuis (?) and McCracken (1986) all in different ways critique that current trend. Van der Laan and Velthuis (?) find that people mostly want to wear and buy things that they feel fits in with who they are. Vidcan and Ulusory (2012) have found that most people also put something of themselves into the looks of an avatar. This would also be a possibility in Fallout, Skyrim and Dragon Age because at the start of the game you have a lot of options to customise the look of your avatar.

However in Skyrim, fallout and dragon age physical attributes are not so easy to change during a single game as in SL and HH and you are not free to consume all items like you are in those games. The race and/or class of your avatar effects which armour, clothes and weapons (including spells) the avatar can use. This adds another puzzle to the game-play, the player has to find and use the right kinds of items, but it does not give players the enjoyment of having a fluid virtual identity. You can change what weapons you can use only if you invest a lot of special points into changing your abilities, but this is not an efficient process. Changing the identity of your avatar in this way is time consuming but it might give experienced players a new goal and sense of newness. Because some races and classes can never be as good in certain skills as other, you will always keep a disadvantage when you change tactics during a game play-through. So the game seems to discourage playing with the identity of your avatar in a single game.

The easier option is to start a new game and create a new avatar. The games all allow multiple save games. This would mean that in this new game you lose all your progress and have to

start all over again. All the games I have looked at are open world, have an enormous amount of missions and your choices influence the way the story goes. A new save game gives the player a chance to play a whole different game with his or her new avatar. In this way the games give the players an accessible and interesting way of playing with their identity through the identity of their avatar. Not only by giving players the option to create multiple physically different avatars but also by letting different choices influence the virtual world in different ways.

2.6. Making things with your own hands on the controller

The games all give players the opportunity to make specific virtual goods out of other specific virtual goods. In Skyrim they can brew soup made from foodstuffs on the fire, make potions from herbs they found on a workbench, make leather-strips from animals they killed on a rack, forge swords out of ore they dug up in a smith's forge and enchant weapons with discovered spells on a special table. In Fallout they can assemble weapons from schematics and ingredients on a workbench. In Dragon Age you can become specialised in brewing potions from herbs and/or enchanting weapons with spells. Making things yourself can be beneficial to reaching in-game goals because it is cheaper in terms of game money and can give you stronger armour and weapons. But it is time consuming to gather the ingredients and to be good at making things you must spend precious level points that might have been used to become better at attack or defence. These choices add another puzzle-element to the game-play, and add new goals and reasons for exploration. For example defeating enough dragons for dragon armour, or trying to find a luminous plant in a swamp.

Because the creation game-play mechanic is so elaborate in Skyrim I think it serves to provide another source of enjoyment for players. According to Marx and Simmel (as interpreted by Ritzer, 2008) and Ritzer himself (2008), modern consumers are estranged from the production process because they either only perform a very specialised action or are not directly involved. This estranges them from the products themselves. I think the game-mechanic of hunting and making your own food, medicine, clothes and weapons is enjoyable to consumers because it (re-)connects them to production processes and to products themselves.

3 Discussion

From my findings I conclude that virtual consumption is not a whole new way of consuming, but more an extension of material consumption. The nature of the products might be different, but it seems the nature of the consumers is not. I do believe that consumption in games can add something to material consumption because its digital form provides more possibilities for re-enchantment, not only through new products but also through providing new worlds in which to consume.

I also believe it can satisfy the perceived and/or actual needs of modern consumers in a more environmentally sustainable way than material consumption. If modern consumption can be redirected at in-game virtual worlds this would put less pressure on the environment.

Of course consuming digital virtual goods has some of the same pitfall that re-enchantment through material products has, namely that it wears off, and will eventually lead to a more advanced state of alienation and loss of meaning for consumers. However, game products can be an accessible resource for creativity both in the game itself through changing the virtual world, as outside it through prosumption and fan-art. Maybe consumers can keep enchanting their own lives by being creative in this way.

Redirecting consumption to virtual worlds might even lead to more equality, as in-game consumption is not based on real money, aside from owning a platform and internet connection, and not based on class or gender (nowadays). In this consumption society virtual consumption might be a resource for people who can consume little material products to regain a sense of possibility, much like the malls were in the past.

Bibliography

Campbell, Collin, 'When the meaning is not a message: a critique of the consumption as communication thesis', in: Malcolm Barnard (ed.), *Fashion Theory. A Reader*, London: Routledge, 2007, p. 159-169.

Denegri-Knott, Janice. Watkin, Rebecca. Wood, Joseph (2012) 'Transforming digital virtual goods into meaningful possessions' in: Mike Molesworth and Janice Denegri-Knott (ed), *Digital Virtual Consumption*: 1-8

Johnston, José and Shyon Baumann (2007), 'Democracy versus Distinction: A Study of Omnivorousness in Gourmet Food Writing'. *American Journal of Sociology* 113(1): 165-204.

Laan, Elise van der and Olav Velthuis, 'Reflecting who I am. A critique of the constructivist paradigm in the sociology of clothing and consumption', *Journal of Consumer Culture*, forthcoming.

Lehdonvita, Vili (2012), 'A History of the Digitalisation of consumer culture' in: Mike Molesworth and Janice Denegri-Knott (ed), *Digital Virtual Consumption*: 11-29

Lehtonen, Turo-Kimmo and Pasi Falk (1997), 'Shopping in the East Centre Mall'. In: Pasi Falk and Colin Campbell (Eds.), *The Shopping Experience*. London: Sage: 136-166.

McCracken, Grant, 'Culture and Consumption: A Theoretical Account of the Structure and Movement of the Cultural Meaning of Consumer Goods', *Journal of Consumer Research*, 13 (1), 1986, pp. 71-84.

Molesworth, Mike (2012) , 'First person shoppers: consumer ways of seeing in videogames', in: Mike Molesworth and Janice Denegri-Knott (ed), *Digital Virtual Consumption*: 1-8

Molesworth, Mike. Denegri-Knott, Janice, 'Making sense with and making sense of' in: Mike Molesworth and Janice Denegri-Knott (ed), *Digital Virtual Consumption*: 1-8

Myers, David. (2012). 'True or false objects: virtual commodities in games' in: Mike Molesworth

and Janice Denegri-Knott (ed), *Digital Virtual Consumption*: 46-60

Ritzer, George, 'Enchanting a Disenchanted World: Revolutionizing the Means of Consumption', in: George Ritzer, *Explorations in the Sociology of Consumption*, London: Sage, 2001, p. 108-131.

Ritzer, George, *Classical Sociological Theory*, New York: McGrawHill

Smart, Barry, *Consumer Society. Critical Issues and Environmental Consequences*, London: Sage, 2010, pp. 200-225

Vidcan, Handan. Ulusoy, Ebru (2012) 'Creating Virtual Selves in Second Life' in: Mike Moleswort and Janice Denegri-Knott (ed), *Digital Virtual Consumption*: 178-193

Warde, Alan. Martens, Lydia. Olsen, Wendy, 'Social Distinction and Dining Out Consumption and the Problem of Variety: Cultural Omnivorousness', *Sociology* 1999 33: 105

(www.psychologyofgames.com/2011)

<http://www.g4tv.com/thefeed/blog/post/724066/loving-the-loot-the-psychology-of-collecting-stuff/>) accessed on 28-03-2914