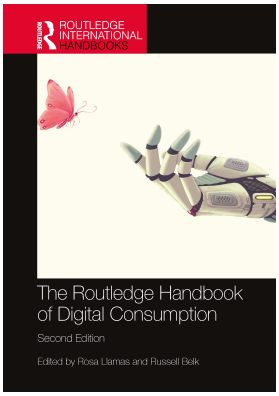

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Online games

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ONLINE GAMES

consuming experiences and interacting in virtual worlds

Marlon Dalmoro, João Pedro dos Santos Fleck and Carlos Alberto Vargas Rossi

Introduction

Although many studies describe the rational analytical processing in games and gaming consumption, we also should acknowledge the experiences and social interactions that constitute games consumption as unique consumer culture and enable the development of the gamer as a consumer subject. Based on previous literature on gamers and consumer culture, this chapter explores key themes in existing research on games consumption to provide an overview of video games as a form of digital consumption. In particular, we describe online games as a continuous and fascinating process of gamer subject formation and consumer culture constitution.

Despite almost a half-century of existence, video games remain only partially understood due to their complexity. Video games are not merely a technological device, they are a medium and an entertainment platform that invites the consumer to act, transposing the gamers to a particular sphere of playful experience (Abbasi et al. 2019) and a cultural universe for consumption (Muriel and Crawford 2018). The discipline of games studies emerged in the late 1990s aiming at describing the complex relationship between new forms of communication and interaction in games (Wills 2019). Since then, only a few studies have been looking at games focusing on consumption, targeting mainly games as a consumption artifact and gamers as a market niche – e.g., describing video game console choices and behavioral consumption of gaming content (Hamari and Keronen 2017).

The games industry has become one of the largest entertainment businesses, and its 2020 revenue was estimated at a total of US$159 billion – increasing more than 9% over the previous year (Newzoo 2020). Nowadays, 75% of Americans have at least one gamer in their household (ESA 2020). Recently, the games have produced gamification of the consumer experience beyond video games themselves, transforming how consumers work, shop, and communicate (Woodcock and Johnson 2018). Consequently, other media products, platform economy, digital distribution, and online experiences have driven the gaming industry's transformation (Hamari, Hanner, and Koivisto 2017). Furthermore, the digital phenomenon has influenced not only the way people access video games but also enabled the creation of new possibilities of interaction, experience, and payment for them. Gamers create an ongoing relationship between the game and game community through multiple platforms – e.g.,

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consoles, notebooks, and smartphones – that in some cases do not require payment or game ownership (Hamari et al. 2017). Thus, digital games embrace a diverse range of platforms using digital technologies to operate and include arcade, computer, console, and mobile games in all their diversity (Kerr 2006). The online feature of digital video games refers to the incorporation of sociotechnical elements of internet networks and web-based information technologies to connect gamers worldwide (Losup et al. 2014).

Nevertheless, we argue that the explanation of digital and online video games consumption phenomenon resides less in the creation and acquisition of value based on the video games' technologies purchase, but on what kind of consumption experience is produced in the relation between the game, the gamer, and the cultural universe created in-between this relation. The challenge in understanding these relations is overcoming a game consumption description as a consumer (gamer) appropriation of the object (video game) to describe how both elements are co-constituted during the consumption experience. Thus, we recognize online video games not limited to consumable digital media but also as a multifaceted topic involving two main dimensions: (a) micro-individual and subjective dimension of playful experience and (b) macro-cultural dimension of cultural texts – including technoculture – and communitarian actions in online and offline spaces. To analyze these two dimensions, initially, we describe the constitution of the video game as a digital consumption category, then we present social and experiential aspects of video games in two sections: subjective and cultural dimensions of online video games. Lastly, we discuss how video games are an icon in digital consumption and also indicate suggestions for further studies.

The constitution of the online video game as a category of consumption

Video game consumption has become a popular topic of research in the last two decades due to two main reasons: (1) the increase of the video game market and (2) its social and behavioral consumption particularities. Many of these studies recognize that video game consumers make consumption decisions, motivations, and preferences following rational analytical processing (Kaimann, Stroh-Maraun, and Cox 2018). Despite the relevance of these previous studies on video game consumer behavior in describing the decision-making process, they are more focused on the technology (console, PCs, games/software) acquisition than the central consumable object in gaming: the act of play. Video games involve a particular type of 'playful consumption' (Abbasi and Jamak 2017) that extrapolates the technology acquisition oriented by consumers' needs. Playful consumption is primarily motivated by enjoyment and non-rational factors that have proved dominant in explaining the contemporary video game consumption analysis (Crawford 2012). Due to its characteristics, video game consumption involves the convergence of multiple dimensions of social relation and entertainment around a 'gaming culture' and its analysis requires focusing more on the play and entertainment and less on technologies acquisition.

A particular type of play

In describing video games as a form of consumption, the first aspect we need to highlight is the association of 'game consumption' with the notion of 'play' (de Mello et al. 2020; Seregina and Weijo 2017). In the classic perspective proposed by Roger Caillois, 'play' is an uncountable activity for amusement, an interactional activity in which the player is free to try, safe to err, with no or a few rules of engagement without major consequences for the players

(Juul 2010; Walther 2003). For Caillois (2001), 'game' is a system of rules that define what is allowed and what is prohibited, a set of rules that cannot be violated, as it would entail the destruction of the play activity.

Therefore, gaming is a type of play with certain limits. Playing games involves tactical capabilities to deal with the structure of rules that comprise a game (Caillois 2001). Games are confined areas that challenge the interpretation and optimize the rules and tactics that incarcerate the gamers in a temporal and spatial rule-binding structure (Juul 2010; Walther 2003). Gamers find in this structure a clear definition of success – and to achieve it requires skills, efforts, and training from the gamer (Juul 2010). Despite being a free space to play, there is a strong relationship between the agent (gamer) and the structure (game). Thus, the first aspect to understand game consumption is to recognize it as a particular form of play. Even the central action in video game consumption is called 'play.' Video games constitute a consumption category performed by an agent (gamer) dealing with a technical structure (games) incorporate into a gadget (video game console).

Online games go beyond playing

A second aspect involves how the technical structure of games has migrated from physical to digital and its consequences. Internet networks and their greater transmission capacity and speed allow people not only to play but also to stream play live to other players and fans. In addition to YouTube and Facebook Live Streaming, new gaming-focused streaming channels have emerged, such as Twitch, Smashcast, and GameFly. In 2020, Twitch, the world's leading live-streaming platform for gamers, had around 6.7 million streamers and 1.8 million hours of watched content per month (Twitchtracker 2020). On these platforms, users can comment, share thoughts, chat, debate, and interact live with players and fans from anywhere in the world. Along with these events broadcasting, many professional and amateur players became known for their streams and lives. In the era of live transmissions, games with real-time communication have become increasingly common and e-sports events have started to gain public attention and investment from sponsors (Gandolfi 2016; Macey et al. 2020).

Online games and the emerging communication tools allow the popularization of the game universe beyond the living room sofa and its essence of entertainment at home. Cross-screen entertainment involves one screen to play (e.g., PC, TV) and others to watch game content (e.g., tablet, smartphone). Games has been second only to music on video platforms such as YouTube (Taylor 2017). Facing these new forms of game consumption, consuming live-streamed or recorded gaming video content has become a significant aspect of modern game consumption, even as far as replacing some first-hand gaming activities (Crawford 2012). It allows players to expand video game consumption beyond playing and, for many players, the majority of their time watching video content is devoted to seeing others playing.

Structuring of video games consumption

Video game consumption includes features from technoculture and consumption forms that determine a social position mediated by gadgets and virtual social networks capable of enhancing the increased desire for consumption (Kozinets, Patterson, and Ashman 2017). The game's consumption structure becomes even more evident when we think about game technoculture, understood as the various identities, practices, values, rituals, hierarchies, and other sources and structures of meanings that are influenced, created, or expressed by the consumption of technology (Kozinets 2019).

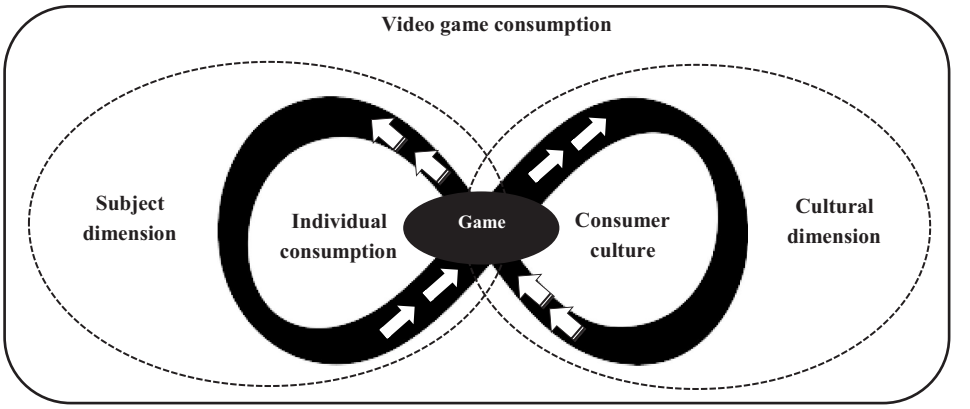

Figure 31.1 Dimensions of video game consumption
Source: Own elaboration.

Thus, in describing the video game consumption we recognize in the center the technologies, in other words, the gadgets of video games that provide the structure for connecting players together around a system of rules (game) and entertainment (Adams 2009). While interacting in this structure, gamers are immersed in a cultural process involving real and imagined worlds' constitution appropriate through playing, sharing, or watching games. In complement, following Giddens's (1984) perspective, the creation of a video game consumer culture involves an aggregate of the actions and characteristics of individuals. The digital consumption phenomenon opens new ways for individuals to constitute themselves as subjects face video games (Belk 2014). Consequently, a thorough analysis of video game consumption requires an understanding of the gamer's subject position facing the game structure and the cultural universe produced in such interaction. It is essential to describe video game consumption as a continuous process interconnecting two dimensions: (a) subject level of individual consumption and (b) macro-level consumer culture constitution. In Figure 31.1 we present the video game consumption at subject and cultural dimensions.

Subjective dimension of online game experience

The development of the gamer is not limited to business and academic discourses about digital technologies. It derives from multiple negotiations between multiple subjects – gamers, game producers, media – and objects (consoles, PCs, games). Dovey and Kennedy (2006) argue that games are a space where discourses around technology, technological innovation, and technological competence converge into how people identify as gamers, rather than assuming that the act of playing video games is what defines one as a 'gamer.' Therefore, gamers become gamers in their subjective experience during their interaction with the video games. The subjective dimension of video games produces a unique consciousness – a uniquely personal experience during the relationship between the subject (gamer) with an object (game).

Looking at online video game consumption, two aspects of the user experience are necessary components to the development of consumer subject: a sense of presence and shaping the world. A sense of presence suggests that the subject feels that they are represented in the virtual world and that others can see that representation – it also involves an immersion in the universe of games. Brown and Cairns (2004) suggest that total immersion results in a

loss of awareness of the physical (external) world. The presence of others – as in multiplayer games – enhances this sense through sharing this virtual space (Girvan 2018). Additionally, gamers simultaneously consume and produce the game world facilitated by the structure and network, shaping the content for their own – and others' – consumption.

Usually embodied by avatars, consumers create content to shape their experience in the game as well as others that are in the same world. Thus, shaping themselves as a subject in the game, consumers are shaping part of a virtual world that is consumed by others, but those others are also shaping themselves simultaneously. This is facilitated through a range of technical features provided by the games (Girvan 2018). Therefore, the game experience is continually produced due to the development of the subject – consumer or avatar – in the game and gamer actions in modeling the consumption space.

The possibility of shaping multiple worlds and occupying them by avatars is one example of the self-moving constitution of gamers as subjects. Avatars are a computer representation of the gamers (an alter ego), in the form of a three-dimensional model representing the embodiment of the user (Jordan 1999). Avatars explore, meet other avatars, socialize, participate in individual and group activities, and create and trade virtual property and services with one another. Avatars also provide a sense of presence, a sense of being 'in' a virtual world – an essential user experience that relies on several features and may be related to other experiences within the virtual world (Girvan 2018).

Video game experience as a flow

The virtual experiences provided by video games are an escape valve for real-life limitations, granting access to fantasy scenarios where players can imagine themselves as heroes, gangsters, and a myriad of other characters. For example, a frustrated desire to be a rock star can be minimized by playing Guitar Hero, and characters may even have extraordinary abilities that are incongruent with our biology, such as the ability to fly (Mendenhall, Nepomuceno, and Saad 2010). The escapism provided by the games may lead users to immersion during play. These exceptional moments in which a person loses track of time and self-consciousness can be flow experiences: a state of concentration or complete absorption with the activity that occurs when a situation demands total participation from the individual, and loss of contact with ordinary reality (Csikszentmihalyi 1990).

The term 'flow' describes the experiential frame in games because grasp the sensation of oscillating between ecstasy – challenge – and goal-orientation – results – in an autopoietic (self-generating) and autotelic (self-motivating) process, anchored in spatial and temporal settings (Walther 2003). In other words, it means to say that flow sustains the enjoyment through a sense of continuous absorption, with the connotation of fluid movement, continuity in activities (gaming) that balance individual skills with an enjoyable or challenging process. A fundamental aspect of the flow in games is learning, since the player may experience an increase in skills for an undetermined amount of time (Chen 2007; Gee 2000). The balance between challenges and skills also contributes to achieving a flow state. If the task is too easy or too difficult, flow cannot occur (Csikszentmihalyi 1990).

Giving its capacity to describe the processual feature of the experience in games consumption, the concept of flow is a well-established construct for examining subjective aspects, like the degree to which players feel integrated (sense of presence) (Cowley et al. 2008; Taylor 2009) and the 'enjoyment' in modeling a personal world during the game experience (Cowley et al. 2008). In the particular context of online games, they may magnify the intensity of the flow experience provided by offline video games since the player tends to be more

involved during their playing time (Liu 2017). Online experiences depend on facilitating a state of flow (Novak, Hoffman, and Duhachek 2003). Online games can generate subjective responses to stimuli, such as feelings of challenge, achievement, escapism, and the experience of flow. Such elements can also be found in other activities; however, the online game is one of the few that brings a sense of connectedness, engagement, and possibilities that are hard to find in our daily lives. Thus, we can say games value online games based on the flow experience the game provides, not only in terms of start playing a game but mainly in keep playing it (Liu 2017).

However, it may be argued that online game characteristics create an analogous situation between individual flow experience and collective social interaction. Flow is related to an autonomous experience and occurs mostly in a circumstance of one's choice. On the other hand, online games are characterized by the interaction between players, resulting in a collective experience. A dichotomy between individual and collective experiences can result in shared experiences. In this sense, the self-confidence that emerges from game experiences gives the participant the confidence to engage in social relationships, thus giving rise to the notion that flow may be an antecedent to social engagement. While flow is transcendent at the individual level of experience, shared knowledge of the flow experience creates a bond between members (Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993) and may result in a shared experience that resembles shared flow (Turner 1969).

Gaming might lead to flow and the implications of claiming that our object of study becomes such an all-encompassing aspect of the subject, sharing a space and a common identity with an object requires considering both the psychological features of flow and the cultural features of the universe of games. The relationship between the gamer subject and the cultural universe of games encompasses many issues in terms of social practices and consumer culture constitution (Shaw 2010). Next, we present this particular cultural dimension of online games.

Cultural dimension of online games consumption

Cultural studies consider the game culture as a media subculture that operates at the same level that other media – like cinema and music – sources of popular culture (Muriel and Crawford 2018; Wills 2019). 'Game culture' is often defined via descriptions of gamers and (a) who plays video games, (b) how they play, and (c) what they play (Shaw 2010). However, only looking at the gamer, games culture focuses too much on certain consumption forms and preferences (Hamari and Keronen 2017). A comprehensive description requires understanding games as cultural texts produced by gamers' social practices, by their peers, and by members of the games industry as a whole (Shaw 2010). Games culture is a critical site where discourses about technology, innovation, and competence in using this technology converge in cultural texts about what means gaming (Dovey and Kennedy 2006). Thus, technological discourses shape who is allowed into the industry in an acculturation process required for entry into the field (Dovey and Kennedy 2006; Shaw 2010). In line with Fron et al. (2007), the game industry has influenced the global culture of play with the introduction of both individuals' and societies' experiences of games with values and norms that reinforce that industry's technological, commercial, and cultural investments in a particular definition of games and play.

This dynamic involving gamers' social practices and industry narratives producing the cultural text of games is also evident in online games. Taylor (2009) describes the 'online gaming culture' as a set of social practices and a shared identity/community created in the game space. The emergence of new technology such as mobile technology provokes a convergence of discourses, media subculture, and human social practices.

Social interactions reinforcing the cultural text

Interacting in games with virtual worlds provides a structured way for people to relax, have fun, and learn more about each other in the process (Fleck, Dalmoro, and Rossi 2013). The sense of gaming as a social practice heightens online. The identification among online gamers and the games' features stimulates cooperative behavior, which can be an outcome of the sense of trust and reciprocity produced among players necessary to succeed in online games. Previous studies identified how gamers might shape a friendly and communitarian relationship with others online because they share a communal experience (Costa Pinto et al. 2015).

The sense of camaraderie produced by the social interaction in online games has a substantial impact on their popularity because sequential interactions become a narrative and thus help to create a play experience (Choi and Kim 2004). In an online environment, teamwork, mutual encouragement, and fun are experienced through group interaction. In a game such as Fortnite, social interaction is both desirable and necessary to advance to more competitive levels. The gamer needs to work in teams with diverse characters who possess different skills to complete a challenge or quest (Cole and Griffiths 2007; Costa Pinto et al. 2015).

These interactions result in spontaneous social connections similar to what Turner (1969) named communitas and, more recently, Pearce (2011) called communities of play. This virtual community emerges when people step out of their regular structural roles – free from the culturally defined encumbrances such as status, reputation, class, caste, sex, or other structural categories – and obligations into a sphere that is decidedly 'anti-structural' since they allow challenging the regular structural roles of the society. As Turner (1982) says, we might consider that video games' anti-structure is a proto-structural system because it is normative in terms of rules of the game but reproduce an anti-structural and deviant narrative given their capacity to generate ambiguity in social life. This proto-structural system connects players among a common interest and becomes a source of culture due to its ideal conditions for the emergence of a social dynamic characterized by feelings of equality, linkage, belonging, group devotion to a space, and transcendent goals (Arnould and Price 1993; Scott, Cayla, and Cova 2017). This gives the players an equal footing to develop intense feelings of comradeship and egalitarianism since players see others like themselves, people who share their values, forming a virtual culture at the interstices of multiple virtual worlds and online games.

Since the virtual world does not carry real-world social restrictions, some social behaviors arise effortlessly, such as sharing. According to Belk (2007), in the online environment of games, it is easy to share intangible goods such as information, opinions, images, and ideas, especially when these are digital and continue to exist after being shared. The gamers' perception about resources limitations and the immateriality of the virtual environment stimulate sharing (Belk 2010). Additionally, to share immaterial goods produced in the virtual world does not require a material detachment and bonds players in solidarity. These bonds are defined in social, instead of spatial terms, and the integrating element consists of a shared passion or interest (Cova, Kozinets, and Shankar 2007). The social aspect enhances the players' enjoyment of the experience mediated by a communication technology, where the game experience can become more 'real' than real life (Adams 2009) – this happens because gamers can feel their life more associated with the game proto-structure (friends, rules, and roles of the game) than with their real life. Amongst their peers, they can be more recognized by their avatars than by their real names.

This level of social production occurs because online games are consumed not solely as a machine/operator interplay but as a proto-structure that permits the social exchange between players. Therefore, gamers' consumption results from a network of interrelated

activities provided by the game structure and embedded in social relations between players. Although players' relationships are usually many in a virtual environment, the interactions occur similarly to the real world, because people tend to be close and look for others with whom they previously had an online interaction.

The constitution of video game consumer culture beyond the gamers' community

Technology is changing forms and modes of consumption, replacing tangible possessions with de-materialized ones: virtual money, e-books, and online newspaper (Adams 2009; Kozinets et al. 2017). Similarly, the result of online games community interaction is the expansion of games consumption culture to the society in general and has allowed the consolidation of games as a digital consumption contemporary culture.

The video game consumer culture is a consequence of cultural texts produced and interchanged through market relations and social practices of playing that create a particular identity recognized as a gamer. We see a growing cultural phenomenon that extrapolates the technologies acquisition or the interaction with these technologies while playing. Online games become a social component involving multiple interactions and varied activities with other players sustaining the digital virtual space as meaningful (Denegri-Knott and Molesworth 2010). Consequently, video games culture goes beyond the play moment, involving examples of gamification of reality, the growing importance of video games among the general public, a prosperous video game industry, the emergence of a video game audience, consolidating the video games as a cultural product (Muriel and Crawford 2018).

Final remarks

We recognize online games not limited to consumable media but also as a particular sphere of playful experience and a cultural artifact. Thus, we need to understand online games as a structure of gamers, networks, companies, and practices that include playing but go far beyond that. In particular, this chapter highlights video game consumption as a continuous process in which gadgets provide the technological structure for connecting players together around a system of rules and entertainment and sustained by the gamer subject formation and consumer culture constitution.

Thus, a key element in current online games is the experience produced through the interaction between gamers and the gamer structure overall. Allied to that, through the constitution of gamers as subjects in the structure and their immersion in a cultural universe involving specific cultural texts, the interaction with other users creates a connection of continually growing strength. Video game consumption becomes a social experience, one that might go beyond the playing moment. Due to the involvement in the online game communities, the user encounters commonalities with other users interested in sharing feelings towards the game. Socialization through the communities creates the opportunity to perform activities online and offline, exchange information, and recommend and disseminate knowledge. Online games have demonstrated that thousands of players can be involved and connected, sharing a unique experience simultaneously.

This chapter contributes to digital consumption literature by analyzing how two particular dimensions – the subject dimension and the cultural dimension – constitute the video game as a consumption icon. In line with consumer culture and games studies, we conclude that online games are consumption artifacts that constitute consumer subjects (gamers)

capable of projecting themselves into the virtual universe through avatars, enriching the gamer to the particular flow experience. Additionally, the cultural dimension of online games is associated with the digital phenomenon transforming the way people play games, provoking gamification of the consumer experience beyond video game devices.

If in the past we could suppose that while the digital age would alter so many aspects of our daily lives, including the way we play online and how we access the world of online games (Fleck et al. 2013), nowadays we also can suppose that online games would alter the way we spend our lives. It is precisely in these transformations provoked by digital consumption icons like online games that lie some of the most interesting questions regarding contemporary digital consumption.

There is still much to be learned about how online games are impacting gamers' and non-gamers' life. Further analysis can contribute to the reflection presented in this chapter by exploring the nuances of the two subject and cultural dimensions. At the subject level, describing the multiplayer game consumption allows understanding the social experiences enabled by this kind of consumption. Multiplayer gamers provoke considerable change in the structure of consumption of video games, including also hardcore consumption formats that are different from a casual player who only wants to play a quick and simple game to relax for a while. On another side, deviant behaviors such as griefing and grinding and negative outcomes such as addiction also need to be better explored.

At the cultural dimension, further studies could explore the gamers' transition for different stages of involvement – from a beginner to a seriously engaged consumer (Almeida et al. 2018). Additionally, the role of companies in support – or even manipulating – the gamers' communities remains a topic of interest to understand the relationship between social practices and the cultural texts produced in these communities. A critical review of the constitution of a consumer culture that supports a lucrative market also can better describe the connection between the consumption of play and game industry development. The size and power of the gaming industry are undeniable, but further studies need to delve further and recognize the consumer culture that orbits these sociotechnical structures. Therefore, further studies can focus on the materiality and even its agentic capacity in shaping video games consumption culture. Playing games involves many interactions with material artifacts (devices) like consoles, PCs, smartphones, headphones, and controllers. Understanding the role of materiality in the gaming experience could provide an object-centered perspective to games studies and digital consumption studies.

Finally, further studies can explore the interconnection between online games and the emergence of interactive media – like lives on YouTube and the e-sport phenomenon – as well as the emergence of the playbour category as a hybrid form of play and labor. Online technologies are constantly changing, and these changes are being transferred to other spheres than consoles and PCs in a way that gaming culture starts to guide the development of the entertainment market overall. Therefore, online games will keep being the future both a good entertainment option and an interesting topic of research.

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