

Concepts and practices of digital virtual consumption

Janice Denegri-Knott* and Mike Molesworth

Corporate and Marketing Communications Group, Bournemouth Media School, Poole, UK

Despite the popularity of online spaces that simulate aspects of consumption-like experiences (online virtual worlds, video games and interactive functions on online retailers) conceptual tools that aim to comprehend such consumer practices are yet to emerge. In an effort to better understand them this paper puts forward a taxonomy that may help us capture emerging consumer behavior in the digital virtual terrain in relation to virtual and material consumption. This may be read as a fluid template that considers the movement between what resides in consumer imaginations as ideal or virtual, its actualization in material and now also digital virtual spaces. We then offer examples of the practices that are emerging, specifically the increase in imaginative resources that interactive media provide; practices that actualize probable, everyday commodities and experiences in the digital virtual and practices that actualize fantastic commodities and experiences in the digital virtual. Finally, we discuss the potential for these to produce new consumer subjectivities and new markets, and as a result we conclude with a discussion of the implications of such developments for consumer cultures, noting the potential for both liberatory/celebratory and critical discourse as well as avenues for future research.

Keywords: digital virtual consumption; liminal spaces; imagination; fantasy; desire; Internet; video games

Introduction

For some time there has been recognition of the role of the imagination in consumer behavior (cf. Campbell 1987; McCracken 1988). Commodities and market-based experiences provide opportunities for elaborate consumer daydreams that sustain desire on the basis that they may be actualized via material consumption. More recently digital virtual spaces such as websites, virtual worlds and video games have emerged that may allow for an actualization of consumer fantasy beyond what material goods and experiences can offer. Exemplars of such possibilities are the ostensibly endless catalog of goods available for consumers to view (and subsequently desire) as well as opportunities to interact with simulations of exotic goods (e.g., a video game may allow a player to "own" and drive a whole range of luxury cars). Virtual worlds and video games may even invite the consumption of fantasy goods such as magic swords or spacecraft. Drawing from Shields' (2000, 2003) theorization of the digital virtual as a liminal space - somewhere between the imagination and the material - we label these practices as digital virtual consumption (DVC). DVC differs from virtual or imaginary consumption inasmuch as the object of consumption does not only reside in the consumer's mind, but is experienced as owned and used within the parameters

*Corresponding author. Email: JDKnott@bournemouth.ac.uk

of specific digital virtual spaces. DVC also differs from material consumption as the object of consumption lacks material substance and cannot be used in material reality (a digital virtual sword cannot cut; a digital virtual car cannot be used to transport its owner). The ontological stature of the digital virtual as "an in-between" place may allow for experimentation beyond "normal" consumer subject positions, for example, consumers may act out the roles of wizard, criminal, of producer or of entrepreneur. In addition to such movements between the consumer's imagination and the digital virtual such activities may interact with material markets in complex ways. Individuals may obtain digital virtual goods and services for free; they may buy them with digital virtual money (simulating material consumption) or even purchase them with material wealth. They may also trade digital virtual commodities for either digital virtual money or material currency.

Together, such possibilities open up a significant area of enquiry for consumer research. The purpose of this paper is to sketch a conceptual grid through which we can begin to document DVC and map out its relationship to both material and virtual (imaginary) consumption. We first consider the progressive trend toward virtual "consumption practices, arguing that they are the latest stage in an ongoing transformation of consumption practice from a focus on utility through emotional value, sign value and experiential, playful experience. Building on Shields' (2003) ontological tetrad and consumer behavior theory dealing with the consumer imagination, we then put forward a taxonomy that enables us to conceptualize DVC as a space between virtual and material consumption. The key argument underpinning the need for such exercise is the requirement to conceptually come to grips with the nature of DVC, which to date has received very little attention from consumer research. This lack of attention is surprising given the growth of digital virtual spaces. In addition to the many millions using the web and video games, digital virtual worlds (of which there are 220 accounted for and more currently under development) host thriving populations, with some having already surpassed the one million users milestone - *Maple Story* has been reported to have over 50 million users, *Cyworld* approximately 20 million and *Habbo Hotel* over 7 million.

The proviso that this is indeed a useful exercise is bound to an underlying dualism which seems to pervade existing narratives informing our understanding of consumer cultures and behavior - the practice of material consumption with the purchase and use of physical goods, against pre-consumption activity which largely inhabits consumers' imagination as part of elaborate daydreams of goods not owned. The type of practices taking place in digital virtual spaces like *Second Life* and *World of Warcraft* cannot be easily located in these terrains. Their objects lack the material and sensual texture of the consumer goods of material consumption, and may therefore be impervious to utility maximizing theories (Firat and Dholakia's explanation [1998]). That is, the immaterial goods within digital virtual spaces cannot fulfill physical needs and cannot be used, and hence analysis based on utility maximization may be of little use (Martin 2008; Molesworth and Denegri-Knott 2007a, 2007b). Unlike pre-consumption activity or virtual consumption, which resides in the mind of autonomous consumers-cum-artists who conjure daydreams around consumer goods (Belk, Ger, and Askegard 2003; Campbell 1987; McCracken 1986), DVC opens up mediated spaces where consumers actually engage with digital virtual objects which are desired, owned and experienced in ways as of yet little known.

Our proposed taxonomy conceptualizes the digital virtual as "liminal" - somewhere between the imagination and the material - and therefore notes movements

between these three "realities." Instead of perpetuating divisions between the material and virtual, in accounting for DVC, we put forward a more integrative view which we feel may help guide future research.

Based on our proposed taxonomy we assess the scope of digital virtual consumer practices and their relationships with the imagination and the material by providing examples of consumer practices in digital virtual spaces. Like Moisander and Ericksson's (2006) analysis of corporate narratives which used naturally occurring documentary evidence, our work is based on an ongoing review of a range of DVC spaces, including *World of Warcraft*, *Grand Theft Auto*, *eBay*, *Amazon*, *Second Life*, *Gran Turismo*, *Neopet* and *Habbo Hotel*. We studied these as cultural texts looking for narratives relating to consumption in the structure of these spaces and material used to promote them. In addition to this, we have drawn from existing statistics on digital virtual economies and expenditure and news clippings to form empirical vignettes which we use to illustrate our taxonomy.

Finally, we consider the implications of such practices for consumer culture and suggest potential avenues for further empirical research. We argue that DVC represents a fertile ground for consumer research and that documenting consumers' experiences in such spaces, including the potential for enchantment, reflection and positive transformation as well as the negative experiences DVC produces, like exclusion, boredom and dissatisfaction, are journeys worth embarking on.

The emergence of DVC

At the height of its popularity, *Second Life* was the example par excellence of consumption in a digital, computer-mediated space (Business Week 2006; The Economist 2006). The virtual world's resident reporter, Hamlet Linden, provides commentary on the consumer behavior of its residents. In his blog, he describes a house with a grand Victorian splendor, greenish glass panes and elaborate latticework arches, reminiscent of the 1851 Great Exhibition's Crystal Palace. Above it hangs a luminous sign reading "Catherine Omega." After interviewing Catherine in 2003, Hamlet Linden observed that her *Second Life* virtual home's architecture and Catherine's determination to signal its ownership may have something to do with her building it while living in an abandoned apartment with no running water (Wagner 2003). The tension between her humble apartment and her palatial digital virtual home raises issues regarding the ontological stature and legitimacy of digital virtual commodities. Four years after that interview, Linden pondered on the way in which real world status and *Second Life* identity interact, suggesting that digital worlds provides individuals with fantastical simulations and possibilities of action not readily possible off the screen (Wagner 2007).

Second Life joins other digital virtual spaces that encourage similar practices, like *NeoPet*, a community which trades artifacts for digital virtual pets, *Habbo Hotel*, a community for teenagers where they can buy and trade digital virtual items for their own private rooms, and *World of Warcraft*, a massive online game where players can buy magical artifacts to aid them in quests for power and gold. Other popular worlds include *Entropia*, where consumers become colonists to exploit the rich resources of planet Calipso and can buy resorts, islands and weapons; in *Club Penguin* children can purchase virtual clothes for their penguins and buy decorations for igloos. IGE Ltd., an independent online gaming firm, calculates that about \$1 billion in real money was spent in 2005 on virtual goods and services in total (Hof 2006), and according to

Kilpatrick (2007), *Second Life* spending can reach almost two million dollars in a 24-hour period. Consumers have been said to spend from \$5.00 on virtual designer outfits (Yoon 2002), \$2000 on powerful characters (Kilpatrick 2007) to \$100,000 on an asteroid resort (Virtual World News 2007), and auction sites created solely for the trading of virtual goods have said to receive over two million hits a day (Bartle 2004). In the Harvard Business Review (Hemp 2006, 28), "virtual worlds" are described as capable of replicating for consumers the "sort of buying experience they have in the real world." Similarly, the processes of transforming online labor and creativity into real cash is described in *The Economist* (2006) as one that can even "make you rich for real."

While there *is* commentary on the ways in which the digital virtual allows consumption-like experiences, much existing analysis revolves around describing their potential as market economies (e.g., see Castronova 2003, 2006). The ease with which adults engage with DVC activities and their desire to do so are less well accounted for. In addition, not all DVC may involve direct financial exchange. For example, aspects of consumption such as window-shopping may be enhanced as consumers browse online stores and auctions *without* buying, and as brand owners explore the digital virtual through websites and video game product placement, consumers may also engage in complex simulated consumption for "free." What we see then is an elaborate range of ways in which consumption-like activities now take place in digital simulations, and so we can see these as manifestations of consumer culture rather than just economic exchanges. Although not all online spaces are obviously structured as spaces to consume, we note that many of them do support, or even focus on consumption-like behaviors.

These consumer practices that lack material presence undermine "Classical" theories of consumption that are based on rational needs or economic utility (e.g., see Firat and Dholakia's explanation [1998]) and draw our attention to a trend toward experiential consumption, and within this a projection toward esthetic, symbolic qualities. We may observe that as consumer culture moves away from the material, the productive apparatus and related demand factors sustaining consumer economies reconfigure the commodity-type produced and the types of consumer practices which accompany them such that markets and consumer cultures are in an iterative relationship (e.g., see Bauman's [1988] analysis, or Lee 1993). Growth in online auctions, video games and online virtual worlds therefore results from and sustains changes in cultural practices.

The historical development of this mass anesthetization of consumer culture is presented by Slater as the Fordizing of American society between the turn of the century and the 1960s. Early mass production required, according to Slater (1997, 187), "the consumption of standardized goods, subordinated to a 'functional aesthetic' that is amenable to automated mass production." Menial, repetitive, factory tasks, low wages, the machine-like character of the assembly line, and increasingly sophisticated disciplinary mechanisms to control workers made factories sites of potential revolt (Ewen 1976; Gabriel and Lang 1995). Against this potentially gloomy, alienating monotony the cornucopia of goods found in the marketplace came to represent, for the worker-made consumer, appropriate means to fashion himself a more satisfying way of being (Ewen 1976; Bauman 1988; Gabriel and Lang 1995). According to Ewen (1976) this system of social order hinged on the continued symbiosis of aspirations between forces of labor and that of the capital, where there the laborer became a keen consumer of what was produced by the owners of capital.

However, such symbiosis was undermined in the 1970s by a long line of standardized products and saturated markets. Automation "broke" the first part of the Fordist deal, and later cheap imports allowed most consumers to easily achieve ownership of most commodities, "breaking" the second half. The required solution was more flexible ways to produce and target customized goods and to deploy advertising in order to maintain a fast pace of consumer tastes and styles (Slater 1997; Firat and Dholakia 1998). At this point, according to Campbell (1987), nobody bought things because they "needed" them but rather because they had desire for the pleasures of an endlessly novel and exciting marketplace. The post-Fordism of the 1970s revitalized saturated markets as sites of pleasure by superseding the standardized commodity with increasingly differentiated products for increasingly fragmented consumer segments and in this development the doctrine of consumption as a "good life" became intimately entwined with an appetite to have and discard what was produced (McCracken 1988; Bauman 1988; Ewen 1973).

For Slater a key aspect of the trajectory that starts with post-Fordism and has continued to later consumer cultures "is the dematerialization of objects and commodities, indeed of the economy and ultimately of society as a whole" (Slater 1997, 193). The result, according to Firat and Dholakia's (1998) historization of consumption practices, is consumer culture as a carnival of hyperreal moments, where the sign becomes what is to be consumed. Firat and Dholakia (1998) describe postmodern consumers as enamored with the images created by advertising and free to select the "identity" of the moment by engaging in pleasurable, simulated experiences. The sign and simulation is the locus of postmodern consumption (Firat and Dholakia 1998). Unlike the pleasures of desire that may expire when a material good is owned and used, the manipulation of images through advertising and media as well as theatrical and spectacular displays in everyday urban life account for an endless rekindling of desire and pleasure (Featherstone 1991). This gradual metamorphosis of commodity forms into intangibles is seen by Lee (1993) as a transition in production from material to experiential commodities. Experiences are more transient and may therefore be endlessly renewed, ensuring that consumers never run out of something to want to buy. For Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and de Peuter (2003) video games with their knowledge based, high technology production and constant innovation, heavily promoted through the media rise as "ideal" commodity forms of our time.

Over time then, consumers have learnt to place more emphasis on the imaginary aspects of the consumption experience where functional utility is either taken for granted or seen as irrelevant. Ideal commodities of this era must be used up during consumption or are by nature temporary. They are also the product of intellectual, rather than manual labor (Slater 1997; Featherstone 1991; Lee 1993). For example, Lee (1993) notes an increase in information intensive commodities, and the expansion of markets such as databases, software design and computer systems. This, along with the increase in cultural events that are commoditized and the exponential growth of the entertainment and leisure industries come to signal what Pine and Gilmore (1999) have coined "experiential economies." For example, Bowen and Gilovich (2003) observe that respondents of their lab experiment and surveys reported feeling happier from experiences than material possessions.

So economic imperatives (the need for continued growth), coupled with a society that has come to rely on consumption as a source of pleasure (see Campbell 1987) well beyond any utilitarian needs - or in Barber's (2007) view even reasonable wants - has encouraged increasing emphasis on sustaining consumer desire through the

gradual dematerialization or virtualization of consumption. However, most recently there has been a further project to free consumer desire from the need for material actualization as a focus. In order to sustain complex and unending wants, the market has begun to colonize digital virtual spaces. This opens up opportunities to discuss the significance of the digital virtual in terms of the potential for further alienation and passivity in isolated individual consumers versus the potential for new liberatory experiences beyond the normal roles of a "consumer." DVC may be understood as a natural development from post-Fordist consumer culture; however, our intention is to unpack such spaces so they are open to critique.

Conceptualizing DVC

Understanding digital virtual forms of consumption requires a further understanding of the imaginary (or virtual) and its relation to the real (or material) so that we can deal with consumer practices taking place in digital spaces. In everyday lexicon, "virtual" is often associated with virtual reality, conjuring up images of computer-mediated simulations, where subjects suitably attired with headsets and gloves interact in computer-generated three-dimensional and multi-sensory spaces as if they were in the space being simulated (Burbules 2004; Heim 1998). Such a view of virtual reality as a stand in for something material presents it either as having a felicitous role (a fake, or poor copy), or as an improved hyperrealization of the material where the improbable may be simulated (for a comprehensive review see Doel and Clarke 1999). However, there is some consensus regarding the pitfalls of creating a discursive dichotomy between the material and the virtual which makes the material more akin to what is natural and the virtual, a mere computer-generated copy (Doel and Clarke 1999; Crang, Crang, and May 1999; Burbules 2004; Shields 2000, 2003; Proulx and Latzko 2005). For example Burbules (2004, 163) writes that such separation forgets that "any materiality we inhabit is to some extent actively filtered, interpreted or made" (our emphasis). This is a reference to the social construction of reality where the experiences of any event are understood in the context of memories of previous experiences and in terms of cultural discourses. The recognition of such "filtering" of experience highlights the constructed nature of all reality and therefore dismisses any "natural hierarchy of realness."

As we have illustrated, contemporary consumer practices rely on a shared sense of the symbolic aspects of commodities through which certain goods may be seen as more attractive, muddling any distinction between the materiality-of a good and its perceived desirability (see Arnould and Thompson 2005; McCracken 1988). Contemporary experiential or symbolic consumption is therefore by definition as virtual as it is material. That is, if meaning embedded in objects in their transit to becoming desirable is accepted as a driver of contemporary consumption (see e.g., Arnould and Thompson 2005; Baudrillard 1994; Douglas and Isherwood 1979; McCracken 1988; Venkatesh and Meamber 2006), then mundane consumer goods in themselves are seen and valued through certain imaginative "lenses" - the mental equivalent of headsets, data suits and screens - as they reveal a textured bifurcation of meanings allowing for the generation and understanding of cultural categories and systems of classifications (Douglas and Isherwood 1979; McCracken 1988). Goods then, according to cultural anthropological readings of consumption, are made attractive though their ability to allow consumers to "conjure up" particular values in their imagination (see Appadurai 1986; Douglas and Isherwood 1979; McCracken 1988). When

consumers easily accept the digital virtual, it perhaps reveals that the meaning and value of a thing lies not in its material form, but in these non-material, but very real cultural associations. To put it another way, we may see the virtual, or imagination, as the main location of consumption and the material as an actualization of these ideals, or where these ideals are performed.

The idea of consumption existing "in the mind" is now established, for example, in McCracken's (1988) thesis of displaced meaning and Campbell's (1987) modern autonomous hedonist and postmodern appraisals of the evocative power of the image (e.g., Firat and Shultz 1997; Cova 1997; Firat and Dholakia 1998). In these accounts of consumption it is through imaginary, symbolic, virtual qualities that commodities become intelligible and allow for a deliberation of how life can be improved upon. For example, McCracken's (1988, 110) displacement theory advances a position where "individuals anticipate the possession of the good and, with this good, the possession of certain ideal circumstances that exists only in a distant location." Similarly, Campbell (1987) defines modern hedonism as self-illusory and consumers as dream-artists who "employ their imaginative powers to construct mental images, which they consume for the intrinsic pleasure they provide" (1987, 77). Such daydreams may be considered as real in that they exist, but in virtual form - the imagination of consumers - rather than in material form.

Shields (2003) has further addressed the relationship between imaginary and material realities, advocating an inseparability between the material and the virtual where the latter is a type of "ideality that must be performed," that must be "actualized as material" (Shields 2003, 4) in order to subsist. Building on Bergson, Deleuze and Lefebvre, Shields (2003) presents an "ontological tetralogy" that restates this relationship with the virtual and material as real and more usefully opposed to the abstract and probable as possible. We can apply these ideas to what we already know about imaginative consumption. For example, consider a consumer who wants a new car. As it is actually possible to buy a car such a desire is based on the "probable." Before purchase, however, a consumer may daydream of owning that car for some time and the daydream is also real, but ideal (a virtual car exists in the consumer's imagination). This daydream may be made up of all sorts of cultural meanings related to how wonderful life will be for the owner of that car. So we have "actually possible" things coming into existence in the virtual as a daydream. The consumer then actualizes this daydream in material space through purchase and consumption of the car.

What then of the digital virtual? This may be seen as a hybridization of the material and the virtual-as-imagination: what Burbules (2004, 163) refers to as "both material and imaginary," or what Shields (2000, 2003) terms as "liminal," meaning "in between." The implication is that the digital virtual may contain the actualizing potential of the material with the idealizations of the virtual. For individuals, a reliance on material actualization limits the imagination to what is actually possible and as consumers run out of material things to desire we see the rise of discourses related to frustration or boredom entering the literature on consumption (e.g., see Schwartz 2004). The development of simulations in the digital virtual, however, may invite an individual to "buy" a whole new array of exotic "ideal" commodities based on abstract ideas. It may be the extension of what may be desired that the digital virtual allows that is key to its attraction. For example, a *World of Warcraft* player may come to desire a magical sword suitable for killing trolls. Normally, we think that neither magic swords nor trolls actually exist, rather they are abstracts that may become virtual (real in the imagination) when thought about (for example as a result of seeing

a film or reading a book). They exist - we can talk about them and know what they are - but not in material form. Yet in *World of Warcraft* such swords and creatures exist neither entirely in the imagination, nor in a material sense. Although a film or book about wizards may produce fleeting fantasy (see Campbell 1987), with *World of Warcraft* both the desire for ownership and a form of actualization may be possible. In this digital virtual space the performance of buying and owning a sword may actually happen. One way to observe this difference is to note that when individuals talk about a film or a book they may recall what the characters did in third person - "they did this," "this happened" - but when talking about digital virtual commodities they may use the first person, and the possessive pronoun, "my" to describe their in-game commodities and also talk of what they plan to get and do - "I'm going to get a sword to kill trolls" (cf. Molesworth 2008).

The digital virtual (e.g., websites, virtual worlds, video games) as liminal, or intermediary space therefore has the potential to actualize consumer fantasy beyond what was previously probable even in the elaborate experiential economy of developed cities with their exotic malls and tourist locations. What makes digital environments of interest is the way in which such practices can support new cultural formations. The potential of decentralized online networks as catalysts for cultural change are hinted at in Poster's evaluation of postmodern virtualities (Poster 1998) and in his more recent work on consumption and digital commodities (2004). This potential is sustained on the decentralized nature of communication and the role of interactivity, which attest against existing structures of domination in terms of new practices and the constitution of active agents. Here then is a line of argument that may see DVC as liberating, allowing for re-enchantment and escape from boredom, and also for potentially resisting normative social pressures on consumer behavior.

The carnivalesque in much contemporary, material consumption practice also produces opportunities for transformations through inversions, speculations and playfulness. This promise of transformation is captured in Belk, Ger, and Askegard's (2003) theorization on consumer desire and McCracken's (1988) essay on displaced meaning. In both works it is the promise of self-transformation and one's circumstances which underpin consumers' desire to actualize ideals through consumption activity. So again, what we see is a trajectory or extension of pre-existing aspects of consumer culture. The digital virtual makes such conceptualizations more visible to us by stripping away our ability to justify such consumer practices by claiming any rational or material utility. Digital virtual spaces have opened up new opportunities for transformational spaces and therefore new forms of pleasure and experience. What we are only just able to see and document are the range of new practices that these spaces are allowing.

Based on our interpretation of Shields' (2000, 2003) discussion of the relationship between the virtual and material, we can map out the possibilities for imaginative and material consumption practice. Our taxonomy extends Shields' (2000, 2003) tetrad so that it helps us account for emerging consumption activity, and in doing so integrates existing theoretical insight from consumer research (see Figure 1). Fundamentally, we retain Shields' assigned ontological stature of the digital virtual as ideally real and a platform for potential transformations. This then enables us to see DVC as the stimulation and actualization of consumers' imagination through performances in digital virtual space. We introduce two domains - that of resources for the imagination and digital virtual and material consumption practices in which we locate virtual, material and DVC. We have grouped DVC under four key headings:

DVC as stimulation of consumer desire: How consumers may use resources and experiences in digital virtual spaces to stimulate consumer desire for both material and digital virtual possessions.

DVC as actualization of consumer daydreams: How consumers may actualize daydreams through ownership of digital virtual goods, for example, in the form of goods not yet owned in an online wish list, use of real branded cars in video games or virtualized consumerism, where consumers may enact daydreams of wealth and status in digital virtual worlds and video games.

DVC as actualization of consumer fantasy: How consumers actualize ideally possible imaginings or fantasies, like being a magician or a space pirate and owning fantastical digital virtual goods, such as magical objects.

DVC as experimentation: How consumers may experiment with different subject positions in the digital virtual, for example, attempting to adopt a different gender or social status, performing anti-normative subjectivities, like being a serious criminal in a video game or adopting a producer role in sourcing and selling goods on eBay.

We include potential resources for fuelling consumption at these levels, adding that DVC may extend existing resources for the imagination already found in consumer culture (cf. Belk, Ger, and Askeergard 2003; Belk, Stevens, and Maclaran 2005). The stuff of fantasy (ideally possible) is fed by myths, nostalgia, science fiction and fantasy writings (Belk, Ger, and Askeergard 2003; Campbell 1987), whereby the stuff of daydreams (actually possible) is framed by ongoing aspiration for wealth and consumerist lifestyles as well as a desire to experiencing different subject positions (Belk, Ger, and Askeergard 2003), including anti-normative ones, like stealing cars (Molesworth and Denegri-Knott 2007b). As others have noted (cf. Belk 1998; Belk, Ger, and Askeergard 2003; Campbell 1987), the raw material for such desire relies on cultural ideals (for example as promoted by the media, by advertising and though daily consumption practice including within the digital virtual itself) as well as related personal ideals (that may vary by individual and over time) to help frame the imagination or make sense of digital virtual commodities and experiences on offer. This may entail the crafting of desire for both actually possible *and* ideally possible commodities and experiences based on digital simulations, as well as actualization of more fantastical desires, for instance being a powerful wizard. We highlight how DVC not only provides new resources to frame the imagination as well as new objects and lifestyles to desire. In addition to this, DVC introduces opportunities to adopt new subject positions, inhabit digital virtual worlds and simulate ownerships for goods available in material consumption. We also need to acknowledge that all consumption experiences, including DVC have a material dimension; for the latter, this includes the PC, a screen, cabling as well as an always embodied end user. This material dimension also frames DVC experiences themselves, where the quality of graphics, ease of use and bandwidth speed may interfere or enhance DVC as a means to fuel or actualize consumer daydreams and fantasies in digital virtual spaces. We now discuss these possibilities in more detail.

DVC practices

In this section, we discuss how the digital virtual may allow for the elaboration of consumer desire for material goods. We then explore how digital virtual spaces may

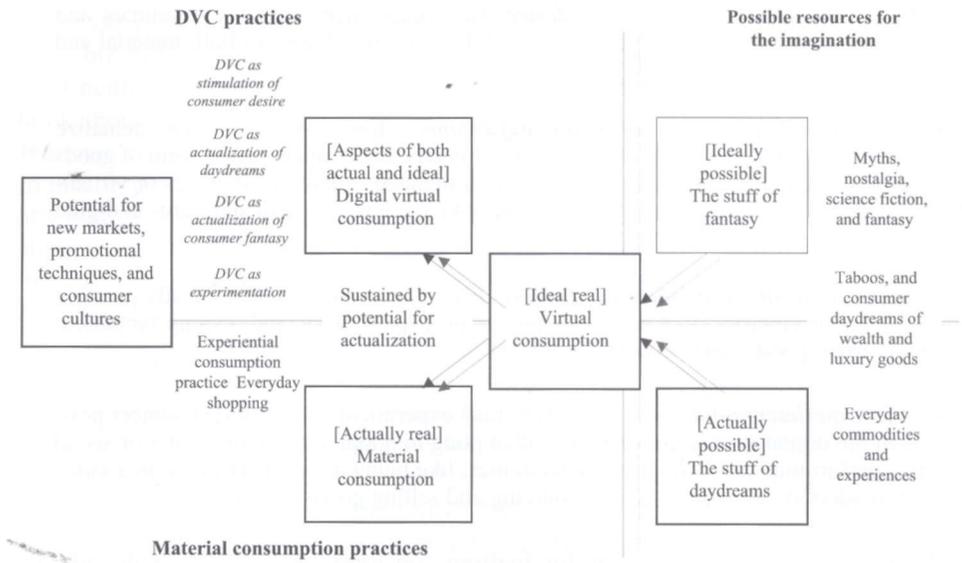


Figure 1. Relationships between virtual, material and DVC.

allow for the actualization of "the stuff of daydreams" observing the ease with which individuals may "consume" a wide range of *simulated* material goods in the digital virtual. Then we review the more elaborate "stuff of fantasies" that may be sustained and actualized in the digital virtual. Related to these, we contemplate the different subject positions that may be experimented with in the digital virtual. We might see these practices as becoming progressively distant from the norms of material consumption, where the first is most consistent with material practices and the last most likely to offer oppositional or resistive experiences. Finally, we also explore possible financial flows and then consider the ways in which markets have come to support and encourage such consumption practices.

DVC as stimulation of consumer desire

This is perhaps the most straightforward aspect of DVC. Websites, online retailers and auction sites present goods and services to consumers and in doing so may stimulate their imagination with a range of goods well beyond what might be available in the consumer's physical location. So we see considerable opportunities for online "window-shopping." This is an extension of an established relationship between material consumption and the imagination where displays of goods and services serve as raw material for daydreams. Featherstone (1991) has borrowed Benjamin's flâneur to capture this playful consumer practice. Like Campbell (1987), he sees window-shopping in general as a celebration of esthetic experiences through the enchantment of *everyday* items. Featherstone (1998) also explores the ways in which the wonderings of the flâneur may be heightened by interactive media. Window-shopping for desirable items on the Internet may be an enhanced flânerie, where the highly "mobile" electronic flâneur, according to Featherstone (1998, 921), "is not limited to the body's capacity for locomotion - rather with electronic media of a net - worked world, instantaneous connections are possible which render physical spatial differ-

ences irrelevant." Similar narratives emphasizing the estheticization of everyday life and consumption experiences can be found in Schroeder's (2002) work on advertising as spectacle of visual consumption and Venkatesh and Meamber's (2006) account of consumption as esthetic experience.

Online stores use a range of interactive digital displays and functions to capture consumers' imaginations. However, just as traditional shopping sites may be enjoyed without purchase, so too may digital virtual stores. Building on Schroeder's (2002) claim that ads are spectacles for visual consumption, on DVC this may mean that the ad literally becomes the product, which is consumed for its esthetic value.

Individuals may find the experience of simply viewing goods online to be pleasurable, as they consume idealized images attached to goods. In a discussion on window-shopping, Falk and Campbell (1997) describe store displays as "experiential free-ware," now we see digital experiential freeware in abundance. The web is crowded with virtual displays against which consumers may test their tastes and allow themselves to construct pleasurable future scenarios of ownership. In these experiences, the esthetic pleasure of navigating digital environments and their goods may produce similar escapes from every day life to those noted by Venkatesh and Meamber (2008). Such is the scope of commodities displayed online that it seems likely that the ratio of looking to buying may be high. If, as Falk and Campbell (1997) and Campbell (2004) suggest, much of the pleasure of window-shopping rests on a large supply of new images, the online environment provides an endless and changing series of novel, elusive and potentially desirable objects. In this way, such spaces of DVC may also be similar to epistemic objects (cf. Zwick and Dholakia 2006) in that they continuously motivate the consumer to explore, imagine, discover and experience emotions strong enough to reproduce a structure of wants, sustaining the flow between the consumer's desire and itself.

Against the absence of the full range of senses, especially smell and touch that may be found in and around offline shops, the online experience may have other advantages. In addition to easy access to a wide range of goods, the digital virtual consumer may indulge in pretending that they are the sort of person that is at home in showrooms of luxury cars, jewelry or apparel. For the online flaneur, there is no embarrassment in entering a luxury store in cheap clothes or arriving at a luxury car dealership in an old Ford. This is not to say that online communities are not capable of forms of e-tribalism that exclude those not educated in specific preferences for goods or ways of discussing them (for example, see Kozinets' [1999] discussion of factions), but the potential for a wider range of explorations of taste is still apparent.

A specific example of an online business that exploits this set of consumer practices to good effect is eBay. eBay presents goods from a very wide range of sources from individuals and retailers, dwarfing most high streets and shopping malls. The bid-floor (2006) statistics state that there are over 200 million users and over 16 million items for sale at any time. The largest category of items of eBay is "collectables," representing goods that may not be readily available in the local area of a user. In addition, the commodities presented are available for view only as long as an auction lasts. Images of goods are presented in an endless "procession" before a would-be buyer as auctions end and new listings start. What seems clear to any user is that many more people view each auction than actually bid and so compelling is the experience that there have been concerns raised about "eBay addiction" (see Peters and Bodkin 2007). But this is just one site that a consumer looking for something to want can visit and may be added to time spent on a range of manufacturers' and retailer sites, including

another online retail "giant" - the vast database-driven "marketplace" that Amazon.com offers and that Nielsen/NetRatings (2008) suggests gets 15.5 million unique visitors each week.

There is a continued trend toward consumers spending more time shopping online (e.g., see the various statistics presented at www.clickz.com). But even since the opening of one of the web's first virtual malls - Shopping 2000 - consumers have done more loitering than purchasing. In 1996, Cyr reported that despite high visitor numbers (about 20,000 in one day), "so far, all those numbers represent a lot of window shopping; actual sales have proven elusive." According to Maravilla (1999) and Thumlert (2001), around 60% of online shoppers fail to complete a transaction at checkout stage, and Doubleclick (2004) has reported that while the average shopping order is around \$180, the abandoned cart was much higher at \$352. More recently, Eisenberg (2008) confirms that the average conversion rate (visits to sales) remains between 2% and 3%. As a consumer practice, it is therefore easy to see online shopping as a way for individuals to daydream and imagine rather than as a way to efficiently acquire useful and needed commodities, yet it also presents the possibility that consumers may spend "too much" time idly daydreaming about things to buy.

DVC as the actualization of consumer daydreams

The extended, interactive "catalogue" is only one approach to stimulating the imagination of online shoppers. Amazon, for example, also offers consumers a range of alternative products when a search is made as well as recommendations for complementary purchases, thus increasing the range of options and images that are presented for a contemplative gaze and subsequent desire. It also offers "wish lists," so consumers don't just browse Amazon's recommendations, but may view lists of desired commodities created and reviewed by others and create their own "wish list" in order to digitally store the current objects of their desire. Any item seen and desired, but not yet decided on or affordable can be "placed" in this personalized area, achieving a liminal status where they are not yet owned by the would-be buyer, but neither are they not owned. Their digital virtual image remains in the "possession" of the individual providing pleasure as an item that when acquired will fulfill the wishes of the consumer. Although much focus has been on the economics of the "long tail" (cf. Anderson 2006) that such functions promote (where consumers consider goods well outside the most popular that physical retailers stock and display), the implications of such practices are that consumers are invited to seek out and want more and more obscure commodities and to promote these to each other as objects of desire.

Wish lists and similar interactive functions illustrate the potential for the digital virtual to simulate possession and not simply stimulate desire. Other spaces invite more complex ownership performances. The opportunity to own digital representations of goods may be exploited by brand owners who allow consumers to possess and play with digital versions of their material goods. For example, Nelson (2002) offers videogames as suitable carriers for brand placement messages; Li, Daugherty, and Biocca (2002) suggest that video game-like representations of brands influence product knowledge and even purchase intention; and Jeandrain (2001) highlights that "experiential shoppers" prefer game-like virtual reality stores. In such cases, digital virtual items are experienced as "possessed" by the consumer. This is popular with car manufacturers, for example, who frequently invite users of their web sites to customize a car with different trims, wheels, options and colors, often displayed in three

dimensions, and even saved for future reference. They don't actually own the material car, but they do possess it in their personalized account, inciting desire through continued play.

In video games an individual may also "play" at purchasing commodities that represent a material equivalent. For example, in the video game *Gran Turismo*, players may wander the digital virtual showrooms of major car manufactures dreaming about ownership of the exotic cars on display. Winning races in the game provides a player with digital virtual "prize money." With this, and even with proceeds from the "sale" of a currently "owned" digital virtual car, the player can buy more and more expensive models. The game even lets a player choose the color of his car and use digital virtual money to personalize it by visiting an in-game tuning specialist and "buying" upgrades. In other racing simulations such as the *Need for Speed* franchise, the customizing of cars becomes even more central to the game and may occupy more of a player's time. In both cases care is taken to include currently desirable models in the games. This is achieved through negotiation with car manufacturers who may see such games as significant brand placement opportunities (cf. Molesworth 2006). For example, Lienert (2004) cites players of *Gran Turismo* who claim:

You materially know the product. You can pick a car, accessorize it, tune it and drive it in the game under realistic conditions. It's better than any brochure.

Such was the desire of players of *Gran Turismo* for the Mitsubishi Lancer featured in the game, but not available from material US dealerships, that their requests to buy the material thing led Mitsubishi to change its US import strategy (Gamasutra 2002).

The Sims franchise allows players a much wider range of digital virtual commodities to buy (although they are not branded in this case) and has been described as "virtualized consumerism" (Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and de Peuter 2003). A player of *The Sims* again uses digital virtual "money" - the product of some unperformed labor - to buy a home and fill it with all the commodities they desire. The actualization of the daydream of a "perfect lifestyle" is made manifest through the use of commodities within the game (see Molesworth 2008). Such is the significance of this experience that it may drive desire toward either other digital virtual commodities or the material commodity it represents (see Molesworth and Denegri-Knott 2007a, 2007b), although it seems clear that in the case of brand placement the intention of marketers is the latter. These practices may represent a departure from the familiar relationship between consumer desire and actualization where actualization takes place through DVC rather than through material consumption even when such things do exist in the material world.

DVC as the actualization of consumer fantasy

We have already hinted that digital virtual consumer practices may be helpfully separated into two kinds: ones that simulate consumption of material goods but on digital virtual platforms, and those practices that are embroiled with more abstract fantasies. Whereas material consumption can only ever actualize the probable, some digital virtual spaces are outlets for the actualization of the abstract. One result, as we have already suggested, is that consumers may explore ownership of a range of luxury commodities that exist in material form, and are therefore possible, but that they are extremely unlikely to ever acquire outside the digital virtual: for example, elaborate

homes built in *Second Life* or *The Sims* or exotic cars customized in other video games. An extension of this set of practices is that desire may be extended to fantastical domains, where the digital virtual representation is not a stand in for a physical good, but rather simulates something abstract and therefore otherwise impossible to actually own. This is seen in a number of video games that support economic systems around fantastical digital virtual items. For example, in *World of Warcraft* the goods presented to the consumer include magic staffs, swords, armor and other fantastic digital artifacts. In games such as those based on the *Lord of the Rings* or on *Star Wars*, players may even hope to possess items which previously could only be experienced vicariously through text and film-based fictions. Game producers balance acquisition of such commodities such that there are always new and rarer items or experiences to be strived for. For example, in *World of Warcraft* some items are only available to players that have reached the highest "level," based on experience awarded during the game. Game designers also ensure continued interest through the introduction of "expansion packs" that may add new objects, places to visit or abilities for players that have completed current quests. Here, although the goods are abstract, the structure of desire is consistent with material consumer behavior. Players "work" (in the form of quests and other in-game activity) in order to achieve the very high-quality goods and find themselves in a never-ending cycle of desire, acquisition, then re-hooking of desire onto another item. Unlike the material world for many, however, there is also pleasure in the labor that produces the resources needed to get the very best "stuff."

The popularity of such practices may be seen as evidence of an extension of what it is to be a "romantic consumer." Through the digital virtual adults may get to play as if they were children (e.g., see Sutton-Smith 1997) focusing on their imaginations and negating their responsibilities in the material world. For Barber (2007), this is the source of a critique that argues for this behavior and other aspects of popular culture as "infantile" and this seems consistent with Gabriel and Lang's (1995) earlier criticism of the consumer dream artist as narcissistic, and likely to produce a loveless and violent society. Hence, a critical eye may be turned on the aspects of DVC that represent most deviance from "normal" consumer practices. Yet there is also little denying the merit in Campbell's (2005) discussion of the "craft consumer" in which complex consumer practices allow for experiences of achievement and skill in a society where such things may otherwise be denied, for example, through repetitive, unrewarding work. In *World of Warcraft* a player may be taken through a series of fantastic encounters with mythical creatures and other players with the hope that in doing so they will be rewarded with new and exotic digital virtual commodities.

DVC as experimentation

The re-enchantment of labor as "hero in exotic quest" points to the possibility that DVC allows for the adoption of new subject positions. Individuals may attempt to assume a different gender, they may become wealthier and they may acquire special skills (such as race driver or warrior). They may even assume the role of fantasy creature or alien and again this may seem to be a radical expansion of the identity work produced through shopping (Benson 2000; Dittmar 1992; Belk 1988; Campbell 2003). Some of these fantasies may include "consumer" behaviors that are not considered socially acceptable in the material world. Largely law-abiding citizens may become "serious" criminals, may sleep with prostitutes (and even murder them for

money) or may become embroiled in dangerous police chases and shootouts in the *Grand Theft Auto* series of games, for example. So here they consume weapons, sex, stolen cars, simulated cities as raceways, public services (the police) and even drugs. Unlike fantasies like *World of Warcraft*, here the goods and activities may simulate "everyday" material things, but engagement with them is in ways that are not at all likely, or even impossible for most. So the digital virtual presents both new commodities to consumer, and also new ways to enchant everyday reality. A further example might be *Dead Rising*, a video game that positions the player as a photographer trapped in a zombie-infested shopping mall. In the game, the player takes items "for sale" in the mall and uses them to destroy the zombies. Much of the pleasure comes from discovering which mundane commodities make the best weapons.

One result of this activity is that the term "consumption" itself is problematized - or rather that perhaps- the already identified producerly aspects of consumption are foregrounded as a lack of material consumption becomes evident (cf. Venkatesh 1998; Firat and Dholakia 1998, 2006; or Campbell 2005). A player of an online game helps to *create* a complex and nuanced virtual world. Their character and their digital virtual activities - their in-game labor - along with that of other players sustain the digital virtual space as meaningful. In this process the only thing used up is the power to run **computer** and server hardware, but rather than reducing such activity to the consumption of relatively small amounts of electricity - or even only the consumption of computers, network services and monitor screens - we may more usefully see this as a culture *producing* or *re-producing* activity. This is because as a liminoid space, digitally virtual consumption extends a terrain for potential experimentation and reflection of existing and recently acquired skills that is applicable to the types of analysis that elsewhere have made of the consumer a more active, producerly figure.

Again, eBay is also an illustration of a blurring of consumption and production. Perhaps collaboration is a useful term to describe the relationship between eBay and its users. Many eBay users sell as well as browse and buy. In doing so, they are able to adopt the position of "entrepreneur," writing copy, taking pictures and dealing with "customer" enquiries and service issues. On "deal" websites such as HotUKdeals.co.uk in the UK, forum members compete with each other to present the best deal for a range of goods and services by searching the high street and the web. Here there is a blurring of the traditional role of producer (who sells) and the role of ***the consumer (who buys). Forum members enjoy the process of presenting deals*** complete with "pitch" and picture, and of discussing their merits. The use of "consumers'" labor to produce digital virtual space may be seen as a key characteristic of many new online services.

Other shifts away from "consumer" subject position may be apparent. For example, in *World of Warcraft*, consumers may also manufacture and sell their own fantastic commodities by harvesting the digital virtual "raw materials" available in the game and so a player may become a seller or a trader. In *Second Life*, this is also apparent as players may make, sell and buy digital virtual goods; some must do so in order for there to be "content" that attracts other users. This "crafting" or manufacture of artifacts by players, often as a digital virtual "occupation" may even result in an interaction with material consumption practices. We have already suggested that virtual goods, created within the confined and separate worlds of online games, may have a "material" monetary value. The result is that skilled players may pay for their play, and possibly also for other "material" commodities by selling off their in-game assets to other players. This leads to the final part of

this section that requires that we consider the ways in which DVC practices and material consumption may interact.

Financial flows between the digital virtual and the material

As we have argued the trajectory to DVC is not so much a departure from existing material consumer practices, but an extension of a reliance on the imagination for pleasure based on actualization through consumption and an inability of the material to sustain new and exciting commodities and experiences that consumers may use as the raw material for desire. However, these practices *are* sustained by markets. Most obviously we may see this through expansion in the sales of computer and video game hardware and of software as well as the expansion of telecommunications businesses such as broadband Internet providers. For example, Kolodny (2006) cites PricewaterhouseCooper's data that predict that the 2010 global market for video games may be worth \$46.5 billion, on some measures more than music or cinema sales. We also see the movement of marketing communication budgets toward the sorts of digital virtual experiential freeware that we have described. The flip side of a consumer culture based on the desire for the new is that commercial organizations must find new ways to facilitate more and more novel commodities and experiences that consumers can afford. Hence, organizations are either keen to provide a wide range of interactive tools free at point of use, as long as there is evidence of material revenue as a result, or keen to find ways to charge consumers for their digital virtual experiences.

The disruptive potential of the digital virtual means that normal relationships between material wealth and consumption are put into play such that the ways in which individuals pay for consumption experiences may not be straightforward. For example, we have already suggested that online businesses may exploit individuals' labor within a game or other virtual space in order to create an environment that others will pay to engage with. Alternatively, once a video game is paid for individuals may engage in detailed and prolonged simulations of ownership beyond what many may experience in a material lifetime. We may see this as an acceleration of consumption. In a weekend, and for no additional financial cost beyond the price of the game and hardware, a player of *The Sims* may, for example, experience buying a new home and a full range of furniture and consumer goods. The next weekend they may do it all over again, buying different goods this time for a different self. Similarly, once a player has bought a game like *Gran Turismo*, he may experience in a day the ownership of more cars than most would buy in a lifetime. Again, here there is commercial interest in brand placement that may subsidize such DVC, but also the possibility for substitution, where players replace the desiring effort required in material consumption with imaginative work directed within the games themselves (Molesworth and Denegri-Knott 2007a). The implication is that along with cultural transformation there is the possibility for disruption to existing markets as well as the rapid rise of new ones. For example, Mmogchart.com (2008) data show that there are now over 16 million active subscriptions to online multi-player games worldwide. Modine (2008) notes that the revenue for *World of Warcraft* may exceed £750m a year for a total cost of running the game of only £110m for the last four years. An alternative to subscription is sites like *Habbo Hotel* that sustains a business by selling desirable virtual furniture for players' rooms for material money. We also see sites like *Facebook* allowing users to buy each other virtual gifts such as flowers for material money.

The digital virtual therefore allows considerable imagination in terms of ways to make money from consumers own fantasies and daydreams.

Implications of DVC for consumer research

Both the development of emerging consumer behaviors we have classified and described here under the rubric of DVC and the taxonomy we have developed as a potential guide for future research into the area bring to the fore two intertwined areas that we now discuss: the broader implications of DVC on consumer culture; and second, the merits of our taxonomy as a grid to classify and make sense of emerging consumer practices in digital virtual spaces. We punctuate our analysis with openings for future research.

Huxley (1932, 26) famously wrote in his book *Brave New World*:

Imagine the folly of allowing people to play elaborate games which do nothing whatever to increase consumption. It's madness. Nowadays the Controllers won't approve of any new game unless it can be shown that it requires at least as much apparatus as the most complicated of existing games.

We may now see such a relationship present in the structuring of new consumer cultures in the digital virtual. Again we note that the digital virtual may stem from a need to maintain a consumer society by encouraging new and more complex consumer practices involving plasma TVs, video game consoles, surround sound systems and online payment systems. The development of "online experiential free-ware" in the form of wish lists, interactive tools and games, together with the commercial underpinnings of online worlds and MMORPGs suggest a commoditization of cyberspace (Gottdiener 2000; Lessig 2004), and their use in the maintenance and actualization of daydreams suggests a continued or accelerated commercialization of the imagination. In the digital virtual, consumers are encouraged to have more of everything, and to have it more quickly. Beyond the exacerbation of a consumer ethic, consumers are further exploited by virtue of the labor they undertake in games, auction sites and communities, by generating surplus value for the owners of capital. We might also see this in the context of a loss of contemplative time, for example (see Caru and Cova 2003), and note that far from liberating consumers from the socially constructed desire to consume, such developments may make excessive consumption (of digital virtual commodities, experiences and identities) even more central to individuals' lives. If the use of commodities for the construction of identity stems from a loss of traditional sources, then the use of digital virtual experiences accepts and encourages transient and fragmented selves rather than providing something more concrete. This seems like a good way to ensure that individuals continue to buy into the simulations that allow a fleeting sense of identity. So we also see the potential for critical discourse on such developments in consumer culture that may be seen to reduce individuals to a series of media-created fantasies, endlessly acted out on screen. The digital virtual is seductive because it offers so many consumer experiences so easily. Unable to actualize satisfying change in the material world, individuals retreat to the digital virtual as a form of "compensation."

Yet, the possibility that the digital virtual may offer positive experiences should not be discarded. The digital virtual offers a way out of the stagnation of post-Fordism by extending the range of experiences that an individual may desire. It is therefore a

potential cure for consumer ennui and an opportunity for the enchantment of everyday life. Even buying mundane consumer goods can be exciting again if purchased via an online auction, for example, and almost any purchase can involve a long and detailed search containing periods of imaginative play. Notwithstanding the power use of personal computers and network infrastructure, it may be possible to claim that such behavior still represents environmental benefits over the alternatives of international tourism and the consumption of energy-inefficient luxury homes and cars. This is the line of argument that Lin (2008) takes, for example.

Our own analysis is limited by its conceptual nature and while the evidence we have included helps illustrate our taxonomy, this is by no means a comprehensive or definitive account of consumer practices in the digital virtual. Instead, our taxonomy works more as a conceptual footing for future research, providing some working definitions of what consumption in such spaces may be and mapping out its relation to material and virtual consumption. In a first instance, research on DVC may seek to examine how consumers construct daydreams around consumer goods with the help of a wide range of resources now available in digital virtual spaces (e.g., the endless listings of eBay, digital representations of branded goods, video games, etc.). In particular, research may explore how diffuse daydreams of ownership can be "fleshed out" with enhanced interactive functions that allow for simulations of ownership long before material consumption takes place (if it ever does). While this is also not entirely new, as there is research on the role of books and magazines in fuelling desire for goods or experiences (Belk, Stevens, and Maclaran 2005), we can see the practices in DVC as an extension of reading magazines and catalogues as triggers for desire. Research could be carried out on the use of desktop pictures, personalized wish lists and customized simulations of cars and homes such as those in *The Sims* and *Gran Turismo* - as "playful" actualizations of desire for consumer goods. Research could also develop into consumer fantasy, for instance, unpacking what makes digital virtual goods within fantasy worlds like *World of Warcraft* and *Star Wars* so desirable, as well as documenting how video games allow (or not) the actualization of an ongoing consumer fantasy, for instance, a desire to be a Jedi or a wizard.

However, our taxonomy may be faulted for appearing to endorse a tripartite view of consumption where a hierarchical, progressive order between the virtual, the digital virtual and the materially real exists. Put differently, there first needs to be something to be imagined, which is then sought to be realized through a digital virtual platform or through materially real consumption, gestures an inbuilt causality between virtual, digital virtual and material consumption. This resonates with some well-known criticisms found in consumer research, in particular, the pitfalls of behavioral intention models and learning hierarchies where cognition and attitude precede behavior. In order to overcome this potential limitation, future research may produce phenomenological accounts of consumers' lived experiences in digital virtual spaces, firmly rooted in everyday life, through which an integrative narrative which marries the virtual, material and DVC can emerge. In these accounts, themes could unfold detailing the multiple sources used (virtual, material or digital) which may frame consumers' imagination as well as how and where these are actualized or not, through material, DVC or both.

Another key area for future research is exploring the potentially reflective dimension of digital virtual spaces, including how awareness of tastes and personal affinities that result from the crafting of desire is fine tuned and how different subject positions can be adopted, developed and reflected upon. These ontological appraisals and forms

of experimentation which derive from the liminoid texture attributed to the digitally virtual can be explored not only within the confinements of a consumer-as-purchaser subjectivity, but may include a range of different subject positions, like a gnome, car thief or Jedi. Studies could be carried out to document how consumers may enter the digital virtual and learn to become a persuasive advertiser and seller of goods, a criminal or a manufacturer of magic. For example, research could produce rich narratives exploring how eBay enables its users to learn how to frame their goods as valuable commodities, and thus allowing them to adopt the subject position of a seller.

The stature we have awarded DVC as a space which allows for experimentation, acquiring new skills and self-transformation, is conceptually driven and needs to be researched. Here we have suggested that DVC can set in motion reflection and experimentation, and our analysis has been skewed toward the ways in which new media may afford a space for the actualization of daydreams and fantasies not possible through material consumption. There is a danger that DVC as an in-between space may be latched upon to produce Utopian representations of consumption in digital environments, where an ever abundance of goods and fantastical experiences produce a set of conditions whereby consumers can have everything they desired and experience different ways of being, unencumbered by the constraints of physical reality. Such a view is problematic because it reproduces a Cartesian dualism advocating the liberation of the human mind from the constraints of physical cues such as sex, gender, race, class, etc. (Haraway 2000) via electronic prosthesis. Such liberation paves the way for a reading of DVC as a consumerist utopia, where different subject positions and ways of being may be experienced, all more empowering and satisfying than those of material reality (Bukatman 1996; Lupton 2000). Such idealization of DVC would run the risk of conceptualizing consumer practices in the digital virtual as a matter of the mind, and the mind alone, yet we have noted that the material is always present in the form of computers, screens, cabling, keyboards and the embodied presence of the individual user (cf. Ajana 2005). While DVC may happen on a screen where the fantastical is actualized, the material and the virtual are ever present, with cabling, keyboards, screen, a physical body and a reflecting user. Escaping the body is futile, as Ajana (2005) puts it; embodiment is an *ad hoc* incidence which enables perceiving and interacting in the digital virtual. Even the more virtual practices of imagining are firmly rooted in a phenomenal body. For example, as Campbell (1987) notes a daydream is self-illusory activity triggered by a consumer imagination, in material consumption it is a more obviously physical interaction and consumption of an object, and in DVC it is a mediated interaction between a consumer and digital virtual goods taking place on the screen.

The idealization of DVC may be close to William Gibson's (1984, 51) definition of cyberspace as a "consensual hallucination." One has to question, to borrow from Robins (2000), the very real political and social interests that frame the idealism of digital reality, even if one submits to DVC unconsciously or on a voluntary basis. Hence, we should re-consider any corporal amputation as perhaps just wishful thinking in part of those who see the digital virtual as utopia, as this negates the significance of the body or any reading of DVC that does not embrace a euphoric, celebratory discourse. Even Mark Poster (1997), who celebrates the possibilities of cyberspace, notes that the disadvantages suffered by minorities and women in society are often carried over into the virtual domain, where they endure harassment and abuse. Hence, the adoption of different subject positions in digital virtual spaces may also be problematic, not only because it may be difficult to leave the old baggage of our

identities behind in our digital virtual journeys (cf. Ajana 2005; Robbins 2000; Stone 2000) but because our experiences there may be fraught with the same constraints which limit material consumption. -In this in-between space, consumers may be trapped by the very limits of the cultural capital they possess in the material world. Just as material consumer goods are regimented by frameworks of meaning which determine their value and prescribe normative practice of use, as well as legitimate owners, so too are those digital virtual goods which can be bought in digital virtual bazaars and auctions. For example, consumers in worlds like *Second Life* may find themselves wearing digital virtual gear inappropriately or unable to join existing digital virtual groupings as they lack the cultural capital needed to do so. Daydreams may never be actualized in a game platform like *Star Wars* or *World of Warcraft* because skills are lacking, producing disappointment and frustration instead of stimulation and excitement. There are also the barriers which are the product of market economies sustaining most digital virtual spaces. Differently put, there is always a material reality waiting to re-impose itself on those consumers who enter the digital virtual and this is often also the reality of the market. Their digital virtual pleasures must be paid and this set limits to what can be actualized. A deficit in economic capital may mean that some desirable digital virtual commodities, like a virtual resort in *Entropia* that recently sold for over \$100,000, are still out of reach for most consumers.

Perhaps a more useful line of analysis would be to see transformation not as an *ipso facto* condition of DVC but rather as a potentiality. The practices that make up such transformations are worthy of analysis, as is exploring how deep or permanent such transformations are. From distinctions Turner (1982) made to distinguish liminal from liminoid, which Shields (2000, 2003) borrows in discussing the implications of the digital virtual, we can only speculate that DVC supports transitory, individualized change, but again these require further research. In such a project, it would be interesting to see how such experiences are then (if they are) reflected upon and integrated to consumers' everyday lives in the materially real.

Conclusions

We have attempted to identify a historical trajectory toward the emergence of DVC. This does not suggest that current developments in online consumer behavior are a schism, or break from previous consumption practices, but rather that they are an extension of the use of the imagination in order to produce pleasure, with the market aiding actualization of those imaginings in some way. Building from Shields' (2003) work on the virtual, and on consumer culture theory we have presented and explained an integrative matrix to map virtual, digital virtual and material consumption. We are not dismissing the material in consumer culture, but rather demonstrating its relationship to other ontological positions - the existence of imaginings and now also of spaces "between" the imagination and the material: the digital virtual. The ease with which individuals may *act out* such elaborate daydreams is new, as is the ability to enter whole new economic worlds such as *World of Warcraft* or *Second Life*, where wealth, status and abilities differ greatly from embodied, material being, and where the products of labor may be sold for material wealth that can sustain digital virtual lives, or perhaps to enhance material possessions.

The inherent drive to actualize in some way that which enters the imagination ignites a number of potential trajectories for consumer practices in the digital virtual.

Our view is that both the liberatory and critical lines may be valid. For Omega, stuck with no permanent home, there may be a genuine sense of freedom to be had from her experiences in *Second Life*. For others too, the experience of escape from material limitations (both physical and financial) may be real (see Molesworth 2008). For those espousing a cultural or postmodern perspective, digital virtual spaces represent an opportunity for consumers to engage in playful forms of consumption, where the possibilities of "making do" may be magnified. Yet alongside these individual triumphs against the everyday stand significant concerns about a society that is apparently unable to provide satisfying material ways of being, such that life for many may be divided between a mundane and unfulfilling material existence, and the accelerated, spectacular life of a digital virtual consumer. Accepting either view is wedded to researchers' own philosophical and conceptual proclivities; for those well versed in Marxist and post-structuralist critiques of consumption, what we have covered here may be articulated as a further indication of capitalism's inherent drive to structure new opportunities to reproduce relations that benefit powerful capital interests. It is these tensions and potentialities which make DVC a *terra incognita* worth exploring. Here, we have only begun to imagine what DVC may be as we frame our imagination as consumer researchers with a conceptual grid to embark on our own odysseys into the digital virtual.

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