

Videogaming as Craft Consumption

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INTRODUCTION

This article repurposes Colin Campbell's (2005) concept of 'the craft consumer' to generate a new theory of videogame consumption, which proposes that the material practices typically associated with craft labour may be identified within acts of videogaming. We draw on case studies from popular videogame titles, including *Dark Souls* (From Software, 2016; 2018) and *Super Mario Maker* (Nintendo, 2015; 2019), to make our argument, suggesting that a grasp of the controls initiates material practices, like repetition, which provide the groundwork for craft skill. It is from this position that we argue that consumers initiate a craft-like 'dialogue' (Sennett, 2008) with the game's design that reveals the experimental and creative nature of videogame consumption. Importantly, these case studies provide evidence to meet with Campbell's definition of 'craft consumption' as an: 1) 'ensemble activity' and 2) as a 'collection' of handmade things. What results is a better understanding of the consumer as someone who initiates experiences of skilled labour and creative self-expression through the craft of playing a videogame. This presents a new understanding of the consumer whilst challenging the idea that the experience of 'craft consumption' is typically reserved for the middle or professional classes as Campbell maintains.

Colin Campbell (2005) proposes that social scientists should recognise the existence of consumers who engage in 'craft consumption' – an alternative perspective of the consumer set alongside traditional images of 'the rational hero', 'the dupe', and the 'postmodern identity-seeker'. We propose that the same is true of videogame consumption, where explanations of the videogame consumer have tended towards a focus on 'rational pleasure seeking' (Grodal, 2000; Molesworth, 2009), compliant with capitalism and the 'culture industry' (Wark, 2009; Kirkpatrick, 2013), and seeking out new social and cultural identities (Muriel and Crawford, 2018). Like Campbell, we argue that what is missing from these accounts is a discussion of the 'craft' (Sennett, 2009; Ingold, 2011) – the skill, knowledge, judgement, and passion – present within acts of videogame consumption and what material practices videogaming inaugurates through our use of the controls. More specifically, we focus on the 'handwork' involved in playing videogame to identify how videogaming is a genuine example of craft consumption.

Craft consumption refers to activities in which consumers personalise their products by designing and making what they themselves consume. Campbell distinguishes craft

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consumption from such closely associated practices as ‘personalisation’ and ‘customisation’, which he suggests lack the autonomy, creativity and self-expression typically associated with acts of making. Through case studies of the popular videogame series, *Dark Souls* and *Super Mario Maker*, we will unpack the ways in which the hands acquire skill, generate understanding and express creativity through the producing and consuming of digital artefacts. In particular, we will focus on the material practices, that is, of ‘repetition’, ‘modulation’ and ‘consistency’ (Sennett, 2008; also see Ingold, 2011), present within these forms of consumption to show how videogame play has elements of haptic, tacit and reflexive knowledge production. This is important for identifying the ‘craft’ in the ‘craft consumption’ and in repurposing Campbell’s definition to better understand videogame consumer motivations.

Specifically, there are two concepts within Campbell’s work that need to be revisited. First, we will interrogate his idea that craft consumption is an ‘ensemble activity’; that it refers to activities where new commodities are created by assembling raw materials together by hand. Campbell offers up a range of examples here, from gardening, cooking and the building and maintaining of a ‘wardrobe’ of clothing ‘outfits’. We will argue that the ways in which our hands grasp at videogame controllers speaks to the earliest stages of the craft process. In particular, we will discuss the importance of prehension (Sennett, 2008; Anonymised, 2018) in the process of acquiring craft skill through knowledge of how the hands must act to manipulate tools and materials. This discussion will reveal an important aspect of videogames consumption: that ‘action role-playing games’ (*Dark Souls*) and ‘editor games’ (*Super Mario Maker*) are designed to be open systems that provide players with complex and emergent rule-sets that facilitate creative experiences. In other words, consumers can create something new within a digital game, which allows us to differentiate them from straightforward acts of ‘personalisation’ and ‘customisation’. Second, we will consider Campbell’s idea that craft consumption is about the ‘collection’ of things. Both *Dark Souls* and *Super Mario Maker* involve acts of preparation, possession and maintenance – rituals – that give videogame consumption meaning and significance. This opens up a new way of understanding how consumers relate to videogames: as a collection of handmade objects that they preserve and display as material symbols of identity (Dittmar, 1992).

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