

Gambling for Fashion: How Videogame Designers Capitalise on ‘Status Ambivalence’ within Videogame Play

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INTRODUCTION

“All games of Empire are, it bears repeating, also games of multitude, shot through, in the midst of banal ideological conventionality, with social experimentation and technopolitical potential” (Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter, 2009, p.228).

Deep at the heart of videogame culture sits a paradox – or what Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter refer to as an ‘ambivalence’ between different attempts to ‘rule’ virtual worlds. On the one hand, it is recognised that publishers greatly depend on player associations to sustain their games’ interests and profitability (Taylor, 2006), especially in an age of esports and live-streaming (Taylor, 2018) where content is co-produced (Banks and Deuze, 2009). On the other, many see games as a triumph for capital (Kücklich, 2005), particularly as companies appropriate the immaterial, affective and collective labour of virtual populations (Woodcock, 2016). As Kirkpatrick, et. al. (2016) argues, videogames create ‘ambivalence’: their aesthetic dimension gives humans the opportunity to experience creativity and self-expression (Anonymised, 2018), whilst their commodity form imposes new demands and forms of oppression over gaming labour (Woodcock, 2016).

This paper is also concerned with the nature of ‘ambivalence’ within videogame culture, specifically as it is expressed through the convergence of concepts and manifestations of ‘fashion’ and ‘gambling’ in contemporary videogame design. To be more specific, this paper will examine how major videogame producers capitalise on the psychology of fashion (Mackinney-Valentine, 2017), identity (Dittmar, 1992) and consumption (Veblen, 2009) to generate profit and control through the sale of microtransactions, especially ‘loot boxes’. A loot box is an in-game item purchased using real-world money: it consists of a virtual ‘box’ (or ‘crate’ or ‘chest’) that rewards in-game items to players based on the mechanics of chance and probability. Some possible rewards in many loot boxes directly affect the gameplay potential of a player’s character, such as by enhancing a character’s strength, health, speed, or by unlocking new abilities or weapons not previously available. In other cases, a possible reward from a loot box is a cosmetic item – typically called a ‘skin’. Skins change some aspect

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of a player character's appearance – such as the design of a weapon, the effects for a magical or special move, or the pattern and colours of clothing items – by adding alternative visual and/or auditory effects. We look to argue that players purchase loot boxes and gamble on the possibility of cosmetic items due to a process known as 'ambivalence management' (Davis, 1994). Within fashion theory, this refers to a performative act that helps players establish a social identity by communicating their status through the display of in-game cosmetic items. As Mackinney-Valentine (2017) argues, fashion is key to understanding how the modern consumer deals with the unstable and contradictory experience of social identity. Fashion is a bridge between individual expression and social belonging (Simmel, 1957), two elements these skins bring out very clearly in videogame play. They simultaneously signal an individual's own skills, preferences or real-world wealth, while also demonstrating connections and understanding of particular in-game aesthetics, and more broadly, ecosystems of items and monetisation.

As such, we will argue that videogame producers capitalise on this 'status ambivalence' through the design of videogame gambling and the monetisation of cosmetic rewards. The analysis we present will draw on almost thirty in-depth interviews with professional game developers, from both "triple-A" and "indie" backgrounds, from the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Germany, Poland, Taiwan and Singapore. We also hope to add interviews and surveys with several dozen players in both the United Kingdom and Canada before submission of the final paper, for which we will be examining the psychological and psychosocial motivations behind the purchase of, and wagering for, these in-game items. This publication will thus contribute to ongoing debates about videogame gambling by considering consumer desires and motivations, and extending critical analyses of the political economy of the videogames industry by identifying ambiguities in social identity and status as a site for biopower (Neiborg, 2015, 2016). More specifically, it will offer videogame gambling as an example of how Empire operates through videogame culture today and how loot boxes, battle passes, etc. present a new technology of ambivalence through which a 'dialectic of alienation and disalienation' (Kirkpatrick, et al. 2016) plays out. With the gambification of digital play becoming increasingly prevalent, we believe this is an essential time to analyse and critically interrogate these new, and seemingly evermore ubiquitous, phenomena.

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