

# Unearthing the ludic media archaeology of fashion

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## INTRODUCTION

The convergence of digital games and fashion has received recent attention across popular and academic discourses. Spurred by recent fashion movements which have seen the use of digital gaming technologies, formats, and cross-promotions, this convergence has been characterised as a dominant way through which contemporary fashion has worked to reconstruct itself at the digital frontier (Joy et al. 2022). 3D modeling and texturing approaches adopted from games development have been used to create NFT virtual fashion garments with no material counterpart (Särmäkari 2021), while games engines and animation techniques have been used to create virtual fashion retail experiences and augmented reality ‘virtual try-ons’ (Firmanda et al. 2022). Elsewhere, fast fashion brands and luxury designers have cross-promoted with gaming and esports brands, reaching coveted demographics (Lamba and Malik 2022). Other fashion brands have commissioned their own digital games. Balenciaga (2020a) released the browser-based *Afterworld: Age of Tomorrow* to present their Fall 2021 collection. Built using Unreal Engine and adopting a walking simulator format, players explore a futuristic 2031 New York populated by characters dressed in outfits consisting of the collection’s garments. As the luxury fashion house describes in an accompanying shownote, the game enables the player to further explore the sustainability and futurist themes embodied in the garments’ designs; a companion text to elucidate the collection’s philosophy (Balenciaga 2020b).

It is thus unsurprising that this recent convergence of fashion and digital games has already rapidly been characterised within the context of marketing and branding. Noted recent examples exist in predominantly commercial contexts; the digital engagement of consumers during covid restrictions and the brand awareness in desirable demographics achieved by cross-promotion being prominent instances (Gibson, 2021; Lamba and Malik 2022). Commissioned games like *Afterworld: Age of Tomorrow* (Balenciaga 2020a) can be construed as an “advergame” to sell Balenciaga’s Fall 2021 collection (Kadry 2022). Similar observations have long been made in context of fashion film, where academics and creative practitioners alike have directed criticism towards fashion films as often lacking substance (Cotton 2014), existing as marketing tools with minimal artistic or cultural significance.

While Uhirova (2020) argues that there has been a colonisation of fashion film by “the notions of branding and promotion” across popular, industry, and academic discourses, she also notes that the tension between commerce and artistic expression represents only one dimension of fashion film; fixation on this binary blinding practitioners and

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researchers to other identities and potentials of the genre. Such lessons learned in the context of fashion film serve as a key consideration in the fledgling study of fashion games. There is a temptation at this early stage to conduct boundary work (Gieryn 1983) around the notion of fashion games; to define what they are, what they can be used for, where their value lies, and what dimensions of them deserve attention from researchers and creative practitioners. Such an exercise runs risk of being either unproductively circumscriptive or boundless. The limiting of scholarship and creative practice to contemporary framings of the convergence of fashion and digital games dominated by commercial perspectives risks upholding a fragmentary analysis. While perhaps providing useful perspectives into major trends and applications for fashion games as fashion negotiates its way around the digital turn into the so-called metaverse, such an analysis is blind to the ludic pasts beyond its gaze. The key exercise to conduct is not definition, but rather an unearthing of marginalised ludic fashion media to “re-presence” (Sobhack 2011) fashion’s movements towards digital futures.

These musings provide the foundations for planned media archaeological (Parikka 2012) research to excavate a more comprehensive and nuanced appreciation of fashion games. By conducting enquiries into disordered, fragmentary, and otherwise marginalised artefacts and discourses of fashion games, this work seeks to not only augment and challenge our understanding of the present of fashion games, but also explore how digital games have impacted fashion in the past, and how these underlying impacts have informed fashion in the present. In essence, it seeks to decentralise fashion games from any single identity. What more can be said of recent fashion games like the commissioned *Afterworld: Age of Tomorrow* (Balenciaga 2020a) beyond their marketing identity as advergames? Where do they stand in the broader cultural landscape of both fashion and digital games? Through fashion games, how have the fields of fashion and digital games come to influence each other?

Such questions can only be answered by unearthing and juxtaposing the past with the present to reframe both (Russell 2000). At a cursory glance, areas of interest may include models of cosmetic item ownership and trading in games like *Team Fortress 2* (Valve Corporation 2007) (Ryn, Apperley, and Clemens 2018), the assembly of complex identities through virtual fashion practices in and around games like *Second Life* (Linden Lab, 2003) (Liao 2011), and the political messaging behind user-designed clothing in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo 2020) (Benti and Stadtmann 2021). These examples should not be considered as anchor points to plot some sort of origin or definitive history of fashion games. Rather, through a media archaeological perspective they contribute a multitude of answers to the question which underscores this work: what is the significance of fashion games? Doing so facilitates new possibilities for fashion and digital games, decentralising both by providing alternative readings and resisting institutionalisation by dominant paradigms.

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