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Character customization in video games as symbolic consumption - how characters are customized

Marketing

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ABSTRACT

Objective of the study

The objective of this study is to develop an understanding of how symbolic consumption takes place in video games as video game players customize their character. In real life products serve as symbols of their consumers and help consumers locate themselves in the society, but to this date the consumption in video games has not been studied largely. One recognized way to use customization is to display one's favorite brands. Existing studies based on other types of virtual environments suggest that customization features are often used to create a representation of the self to the virtual environment.

Research method

This research takes a cultural approach to consumer research and is qualitative and interpretive in its nature. To conduct the study seven semi-structured interviews were conducted with Finnish 17–26 year-old video game players familiar with the games chosen for this study.

Findings

As its main findings, this study identifies two main themes that describe symbolic consumption in video games. First, the symbolic resources that are provided through character customization are used to create self-representations into the virtual environment of the video game. These self-representations can draw from players self-image, but also from past or desired self-images. Self-representative consumption in video games is understood to play a role in construction of the self like all voluntary consumption in real life. Second, symbolic resources that are provided through character customization are used playfully for example to create caricatures and mockeries of real-life characters and standards.

Keywords

Character customization, consumer research, in-game advertising, symbolic consumption, video games, virtual consumption

TIIVISTELMÄ

Tutkimuksen tavoitteet

Tutkimuksen tavoitteena on tutkia miten symbolinen kuluttaminen ilmenee videopeleissä pelaajien muokatessa pelihahmoaan. Tosielämässä tuotteet toimivat kuluttajiensa symboleina ja auttavat kuluttajia tulkitsemaan ympäristöään. Videopeleissä tapahtuvaa kulutusta on kuitenkin tutkittu huomattavasti vähemmän. Kustomointitoimintoja tiedetään kuitenkin käytettävän esimerkiksi omien suosikkibrändien näyttämiseen. Eri tyyppisissä virtuaalimaailmoissa tehtyjen tutkimusten perusteella muokkaustoimintoja käytetään usein itseä kuvaavan hahmon luomiseen.

Metodologia

Tutkimus käsittelee kuluttamista kulttuurisesta näkökulmasta ja on luonteeltaan kvalitatiivinen ja interpretatiivinen. Tutkimusta varten haastateltiin seitsemää suomalaista 17–26 -vuotiasta videopelien pelaajaa, jotka olivat pelanneet tutkimusta varten valittuja pelejä.

Tulokset

Tutkimuksen tuloksena tunnistettiin kaksi videopeleissä tapahtuvaa symbolista kuluttamista kuvaavaa teemaa. Ensimmäistä tunnistetuista teemoista voidaan luonnehtia itseä kuvaavana kuluttamisena. Kuluttamisen ollessa itseä kuvaavaa pelaajat käyttävät pelissä kustomoinnin myötä tarjolla olevia symbolisia resursseja itseään kuvaavan hahmon luomiseen. Itseä kuvaava kuluttaminen voi perustua pelaajan nykyiseen minäkuvaan, mutta myös menneisyyteen tai pelaajan toiveminään. Tutkimuksen perusteella itseä kuvaava kuluttaminen vaikuttaa minäkuvan rakentumiseen, kuten kaikki tosielämässä tapahtuva vapaaehtoinen kuluttaminen. Toista tunnistettua teemaa voidaan luonnehtia leikkisänä kuluttamisena. Leikkisälle kuluttamiselle tyypillistä on symbolisten resursseja käyttäminen esimerkiksi karikatyyrien ja irvikuvien luomiseen.

Avainsanat

kuluttajatutkimus, pelihahmon muokkaus, symbolinen kuluttaminen, videopelit, videopelimainonta, virtuaalinen kuluttaminen

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1 INTRODUCTION

> "As the opening credits of Electronic Arts' Skate videogame end, I am taken to a screen where a male character lies half-naked. I start to go through the menus to build my character. I give him my own name and edit the face and the body to resemble me. Finally I get to dress the character, so I browse through the menu to find myself some cool clothes. I choose to go with a Volcom shirt, baggy shorts and a Plan B skateboard."

1.1 Background and Related Research

Video game players all around the world customize their game-characters in the games they play, just like I do. Such features have been available for a long time: Tony Hawk Pro Skater 2 introduced character customization features already in year 2000 and racing games have long included the possibility for the player to race with a range of different brand cars. Today customization features are especially popular in different types of sports games. At the same time, these features offer a new possibility to advertise different types of products like clothing and sports equipment.

Advertising in video games is relatively new phenomenon and rapidly growing. While advertisers spent $77.7 million globally for advertising in video games in 2006, the amount is expected to reach $800 million by 2010 according to Yankee Group Research (Goodman 2007). A research report by Nielsen verifies this rapid growth: as the in-game advertising market was worth 196 million Euros in 2007, in 2008 the market was already worth nearly 315 million Euros (Kuutio 2009). The growth in advertising is following the rapid growth of computer and video game software sales. According to Entertainment Software Association (ESA 2009) computer and video game software sales grew 22.9 percent in 2008 to $11.7 billion in U.S. alone and since 1996 software sales have quadrupled. The Interactive Software Federation of Europe has also reported of significant growth in the European market as well. According to ISFE in 2008 interactive software sales reached an estimated level of 7.3 billion Euros in 2007 representing an increase of 25% from 2006 (ISFE 2008). Finally the recent worldwide sales record of

any entertainment form set by Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 with sales of approximately $550 million during its first five days is a great example of the size of video game industry (Activision 2009).

Brand placement that is implemented by means of character customization can be considered active brand placement. Active brand placement is a form of product placement where the branded product forms a natural part of the game-play (Mackay, 2009). Active brand placements have been recognized as a powerful way of using video games as a medium for marketing (Schneider & Cornwell 2005; Mackay et al. 2009). Researchers such as Nelson (2002) have also recognized that customization features that let the player for example display his favorite sponsors or brands may provide for greater brand involvement on the player side. Mackay et al. (2009) highlight that "active brand placements, where the brand forms a natural part of the game play, may provide marketers with a means of converting player attitudes towards the embedded product."

While studies focused on advertising in video games have shed light on its efficiency, the consumption that takes place in video games by means of character customization has not been studied to a great extent. However, some ideas and results exist. In her study of brand recall and recognition in computer games Nelson (2002) argues that player choices between brands might not only reflect their choices in real life, but also affect their brand attitudes and consumption behavior. Nelson's (2002) findings also indicate that virtual consumption of goods through character customization also seems to be connected with consumption outside the virtual world of the game. Molesworth (2006) regards virtual consumption in video games as a resource for consumers to for example explore a wider range of tastes and desires. Lehdonvirta (2009) who studied virtual consumption behavior in an online multiplayer game identifies hedonic and social drivers such as their visual appearance, branding, and rarity of the item to influence virtual item purchase behavior.

As Schau and Gilly (2003) point out, much of a product's functional value is absent in a virtual environment. This is also often the case in the virtual environment of a video game. For example in NHL10 the player can switch between different brands of skates

that in real life differ from each other in weight and stiffness, but in the virtual environment of the game the player does not experience this difference. In the virtual environment the skates are different from each other only in design and brand. Due to this nature of consumption in video games, this study is particularly interested in the symbolic aspect of consumption that is central to the consumer culture and consumer culture theory (Arnould & Thmopson 2005).

Symbolic consumption generally refers to the idea that products we use every day are not used only for their use value, but also for the symbolic values attached to them. The concept of symbolic consumption is by no means new, Levy argued for this symbolic aspect of consumption in 1959, and his view is nowadays well accepted. Today consumers are understood as identity seekers and identity makers who use mythic and symbolic resources of the marketplace to forge a coherent if diversified and fragmented sense of self (Arnould & Thompson 2005). As Elliott (1997) points out symbolic consumption operates in two directions – outward in constructing the social world as products are used as resources to form relationships, and inward as consumption is used to express one's self-concept.

1.2 Developing the research question

It has long been acknowledged that the symbolic meanings consumers attach to products guide their consumption. Products serve as symbols of their consumers and help consumers locate themselves in the society (Elliott 1997). But what happens when the consumption is virtual in the context of a video game? What drives consumption in virtual environments? Some answers have been proposed (Nelson 2002; Molesworth 2006; Neustaedter & Fedorovskaya 2009; Lehdonvirta 2009) but the general picture on how consumption occurs in video games is rather vague.

This study aims to explore character customization in video games as symbolic consumption. As such, the research contributes to consumer research by extending knowledge on consumer behavior in video games and in virtual environments. From a managerial perspective this study contributes to developing customization features in video

games, as the ways players use them are better understood. At the same time the results are also of relevance to those interested in in-game advertising through customization features.

The research question for this study is formulated as:

- How do video game players symbolically consume through character customization?

The following sub-questions are used to develop a detailed answer to the research question:

- Why video game players spend time customizing their character in the game?
- What is the relationship between the character and player's identity?
- Which drivers affect players' choices in character customization?
- How players view branded character customization features?

To answer these questions this study adopts a cultural approach to marketing and consumer research. In cultural marketing and consumer research, empirical analysis is based on interpretation of textual and visual materials (Moisander & Valtonen 2006). This study utilizes semi-structured interviews for studying the phenomenon of consumption in video games. The study is based on seven semi-structured interviews that were conducted with 17–26 year old video game players who play or have played Skate 2 (Electronic Arts 2009a) and NHL10 (Electronic Arts 2009b) video games. The games were chosen as they both have been published relatively recently and include character customization while they present the character quite differently. As such they provide a good example of how character customization can be implemented in video games today. Both games also include a relatively popular online mode that allows investigating whether playing online with other people affects customization.

1.3 Structure of the study

This study is structured as follows. The literature review is divided into three chapters beginning with an overview of consumer culture theory and the concept of symbolic consumption. After this overview, the context of video games is reviewed as a medium for marketing. As the third part of the literature review the experience of playing a video game is assessed along with current knowledge on how people present themselves in virtual environments. The literature review concludes with a summary that connects the different parts together in order to form an understanding of how symbolic consumption might take place in video games.

The methodology of this study is presented in the fifth chapter prior to the empirical research of this study. The study takes a cultural approach and is qualitative and interpretive. Data collection and analysis methods are also presented in this chapter.

The empirical research of this study is presented in the sixth chapter. This chapter begins with an introduction of the games used in the study. After the games have been introduced in brief, the findings of this research are presented before analyzing them further. Further analysis and discussion of the results takes place in the seventh chapter before the conclusions and suggestions for further research that are presented in the final, eight chapter of this study.

1.4 Limitations of the study

This study is limited to studying the symbolic consumption that takes place through character customization in video games. Consequently, the efficiency of brand placements in character customization features is assessed only to present the context of this study and to demonstrate how this form of advertising works. The effects of seeing brands and choosing between them while using customization features and playing the game with a customized character are not studied here empirically.

Due to the limited scope of the study, the results of this study are not generalizable. However, in cultural research generalizability is not the aim of the study (Moisander &

Valtonen 2006), the aim is rather to try to understand and interpret certain poorly understood cultural practices in a certain setting. This study offers an in-depth view into how symbolic consumption takes place in the two games this study uses as the field of study. The context that this study is based on should also be considered when considering the implications of this study in other contexts.

1.5 Definitions

Character customization refers to the create-a-character and edit-a-character modes in video games. By using these modes players can create a simulacrum that they can play with in the game.

In-game advertising refers to the brand placement in video games (Yang et al. 2006).

Brand placement refers to the paid inclusion of branded products or brand identifiers, through audio and/or visual means within mass media programming (Karrh 1998)

Symbolic Consumption refers to the tendency for consumers to focus on meanings beyond the tangible, physical characteristics of material objects (Levy, 1959). Consumers employ consumption symbolically not only to create and sustain their selves but also to locate their selves in society (Wattanasuwan 2005). Central to symbolic consumption is that in order for a product to serve as a symbol, it must have a commonality of meaning among consumers (Hirschman 1981). These meanings are socially constructed and ever changing (Elliott 1997).

Video game refers to a game using electronically generated images displayed on a screen. High-quality graphics increasingly resemble the real world or stylized fantastical environments. Some video games test the skill of a single player, while other games allow two or more players to compete. (World Encyclopedia 2008)

2 CULTURAL VIEW ON CONSUMPTION

To begin this literature review, it is necessary to first consider the nature of consumption that takes place in video games through customization features. In video games, much like in a personal web space that Schau and Gilly (2003) have studied, a major part of the functional value of a product is absent and the player often experiences mainly the symbolic value of the product. The importance of the symbolic aspect of consumption in virtual environments is evident in findings of Lehdonvirta (2009). His study demonstrates how virtual objects are used for example as status symbols.

The idea that brands are used for their communicative and symbolic values is central to the Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould & Thompson 2005) this study situates within. This first chapter of the literature review offers an overview of this theory. The chapter also introduces the postmodern consumer and the role symbolic consumption plays in construction of an individual's identity. As such it serves as a suitable starting point for studying how players consume using character customization in video games.

2.1 Consumer Culture Theory – An overview

Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), according to Arnould and Thompson (2005, 868) refers to a family of theoretical perspectives that address the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace, and cultural meanings that have emerged during last 20 years of consumer research. This family of theoretical perspectives includes for example relativist, postpositivist, interpretivist and and postmodern perspectives. As such CCT is not a unified, grand theory nor does it aspire to be one (ibid).

Within the CCT tradition, research on consumption and possession practices – particularly their hedonic, aesthetic and ritualistic dimensions – have perhaps been the most studied constellation. Studies have also explored how consumers actively transform and rework symbolic meanings encoded in advertisements, brands, retail settings, or material goods to manifest their particular personal and social circumstances and further their identity and lifestyle goals. Other domains of interest in CCT are the marketplace

cultures, sociohistoric patterns of consumption and mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumers' interpretive strategies. (Arnould & Thompson 2005)

2.2 Consumer in the Consumer Culture Theory

Today consumption is so central to our lives that the characterization of the postmodern self as *homo consumericus,* " a creature defined by consumption and experiences derived therefrom" by Firat and Schultz (1997, 193) seems suitable. As this definition of the postmodern consumer of Firat and Schultz (1997) states, the identity of a postmodern consumer is not stable but rather something a person creates, partially through consumption (Elliott & Wattanasuwan 1998). *Identity* from a sociological perspective refers to "the categorization of the self as an occupant of a role and incorporating into the self meanings and expectations associated with the role and its performance" (Stets & Burke 2000, 225). From a sociological perspective, a person has an identity for each of the different positions or role relationships a person holds in society, for example a person can have the identity of as a father and a colleague (Stets & Burke 2003, 132). In addition, the formation of an individual's identity is understood as a life-long process that requires endless reconstruction and re-evaluation (Wilska 2002).

As the conceptions of identity of the contemporary consumer point out, consumption is understood to play an important role in construction of a person's identity. In our consumer culture the marketplace has become the primary source of symbolic and mythic resources through which people construct narratives of identity (Arnould & Thompson 2005). Consumption is understood not only as fulfillment of needs but also as self-creation and communication (Wattanasuwan 2005)

The description of the postmodern consumer by Firat and Venkatesh (1995) as a fragmented and decentered has received growing acceptance within the field of consumer research (Goulding 2003). Based on their analysis Firat and Venkatesh (1995) argue that the postmodern consumer is best described with postmodern conditions of *fragmentation* and *decenteredness*. *Fragmentation* stands for the lack of a single reality and that the human subject is considered to have a divided self that frees one from seeking con-

formity (Firat & Venkatesh 1995). The fragmented subject is also a *decentered* subject, as the individual is freed from having or seeking a center, or a unified sense of self. Decentering of the subject also refers to the postmodernist view that the human subject is not a self-knowing, independent agent but historically and socially constructed (Firat & Venkatesh 1995). In addition to describing the postmodern self as fragmented and decentered Firat and Venkatesh (1995) point out how the postmodern condition of *reversal of production and consumption* is related to the postmodern consumer. As each act of consumption is also an act of production, consumers not only consume but at the same time also produce symbols and meanings into the world (Firat & Venkatesh 1995).

While Firat and Venkatesh (1995) demonstrate how contemporary consumers are freed from having or seeking a center, this does not mean that the self could not be coherent. Indeed, drawing from their extensive review Arnould and Thompson (2005) argue that the self that is forged with market-generated materials is still coherent if often diversified and fragmented. The symbolic use of products that is central here is discussed next.

2.3 Symbolic consumption

Today it is widely accepted that consumers choose products and services they consume for their self-creation process (e.g. Wilska 2002). Products serve as symbols of certain meanings that consumers communicate by using and not using them. They are a major contributor to and reflection of our identities (Belk 1988). In the context of consumption in video games this aspect of consumption is particularly important since in virtual environments the user experiences mainly the symbolic value of the product (Schau and Gilly 2003).

The idea of symbolic consumption of products is certainly not new. Levy (1959) was first to argue that goods are used not only to satisfy needs but also for their symbolic value. In his influential article Levy (ibid) argued that goods are used to enhance one's sense of self and distinguish one self from others. Today Levy's views are widely supported. Today all voluntary consumption is understood to carry symbolic meanings

(Elliott & Wattanasuwan 1998). Consciously or unconsciously consumers consume things that hold particular symbolic meanings if given a choice. As products are consumed they serve as symbols of who their owners are and help consumers to locate themselves and others in the society (Wattanasuwan 2005).

Central to symbolic consumption is that in order for a product to serve as a symbol, it must have a commonality of meaning among consumers (Hirschman 1981). While each individual may give his own meaning to a product, they become "meaningful only as a part of a communicative process" (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton (1981, 173). For example, using prestige brand clothes such as Gucci or Versace will not serve as an effective symbol of one's social status unless others in the relevant social group share the person's belief that the these brands are prestigious. Elliott (1997) also maintains that the symbolic meaning of a product is socially constructed and ever changing. This means that if the aforementioned prestige brands would be available to everybody with low prices they would no longer serve as symbols of social status. McCracken (1988) adds that this social construction happens through the individual and collective efforts of designers, producers, advertisers and consumers.

Elliott (1997) sums up the discussion of the role symbolic consumption plays arguing that the symbolic meanings products have operate in two directions: inward in construction of self-identity (self-symbolism) and outward in the construction of the social world (social symbolism). Here *construction of the self-identity* refers to how symbolic meanings play a part in constructing people's conscious knowledge and beliefs about the self, while the *construction of the social world* refers to people's making sense of others and guiding of their own behavior through symbolic meanings of products. (Elliott 1997) These two directions are discussed next separately to recognize the role symbolic consumption plays in people's lives.

2.3.1 Construction of self-identity and symbolic consumption

Consumption plays an essential role in the formation of individuals' self-identities. Consumers use objects as markers to remind themselves of who they are and in a sense derive their self-concepts from objects as they use objects to demonstrate their self-

concept to themselves as well as others (Wallendorf & Arnould, 1988). Here *Self-concept* refers to "the set of meanings we hold for ourselves when we look at ourselves, based on our observations of ourselves, our inferences' about who we are gained from others' behavior toward us, our wishes and desires, and our evaluations of ourselves" (Stets & Burke 2003, 130).

The role of symbolic consumption in the construction of self-identities is evident in a number of studies (e.g. Wallendorf & Arnould 1988, Belk 1988; Wattanasuwan 2005). The study of Piacentini and Mailer (2004) that showed how teenagers prefer branded clothes not only to communicate to others but also as they make them feel better equipped to fulfill a certain role is a good example of how objects affect people's self-concepts. Leigh and Gabel (1992) also argue for the role of symbolic consumption in the construction of one's self-identity. According to them especially people who place importance on social advancement or are in a period of role transition like children, teenagers, young adults and upwardly mobile individuals use symbolic consumption in the construction of their self-identity.

According to Belk (1988) possessions, which define who people are, are not limited to consumer goods. Belk claims that for example places and persons around people can be possessed. Belk continues that possessions form an extended self, which allows people to be different persons than they would be without their possessions. For example the Statue of Liberty in New York can be a part of one's identity. Possessions also serve in seeking identity as well in storing memories and feelings. (Belk 1988)

According to Markus and Nurius (1986) the creation and re-creation of an individual's self-concept stems from imagined possibilities of the self. Their argument is that consumers can have an infinite number of *possible selves* that represent their significant hopes, fears, and fantasies. The images of possible selves derive from social experiences, image, models and symbols provided by the media as well as from sociocultural and historical context.

The concept of possible selves holds that in a particular situation an individual can draw from his appropriate possible selves to determine how to behave. Certain behavior leads

the person towards or away from the possible self. Possible selves however do not only guide behavior as incentives, but they also provide an evaluative and interpretive context for the present self. If one has a lonely possible self, being stood up on a date will have a greater effect on the person. As possible selves are differentially activated by social situations, Markus and Nurius (1986) argue that self-concept should be conceived as multifaceted and diverse. This view is similar to that of Schenk and Holman (1980, 611) who argue that people have multiple situational self-images, or "meaning of self the individual wishes others to have" drawing from the same view Stets and Burke (2003) present that people have identities for each of the different positions or role relationships they hold in society.

Finally, it seems that self can not only be constructed through real life consumption but also through video games. Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998) argue that also mediated experiences can serve to construct the self. *Mediated experiences* refer to consumption of media products and involve the ability to experience events that are spatially and temporally distant from the practical context of daily life. Elliott and Wattanasuwan (ibid) posit that individuals can selectively draw from their mediated experiences that they feel are relevant to them and interlace it with lived experiences for the construction of self.

2.3.2 Construction of the social world and symbolic consumption

The symbolic meanings that products carry play an important role in the construction of the social world. Indeed, the tendency of people to make inferences about others based on their choices of consumption is perhaps one of the most culturally universal and strongest phenomena inspired by consumer behavior as Belk et al. (1982,4) point out.

As consumption is widely used to make inferences, it it is also possible to create connections to other people with consumption choices (Kleine et al. 1995). This possibility comes from evaluation of individuals by the products that surround them (Solomon 1983). Wattanasuwan's (2005) description of how doctors and lawyers can be members of a motorcycle "gang" in the weekends is a vivid example how meanings that are attached to products make it possible to create connections to other people. This example

also points out how the postmodern self is multifaceted (Markus & Nurius 1986) and thus fragmented (Firat & Venkatesh 1995). Consumption choices can also be used to obtain a sense of belonging to "imagined communities". For example by owning a Macintosh computer or an iPod consumers can imagine a sense of belonging to a Mac tribe (Wattanasuwan 2005).

The study by Piacentini and Mailer (2004) offers an in-depth look into how clothing is used symbolically by teenagers. Piacentini and Mailer (idib) recognize four themes that describe how teenagers use clothing symbolically. Firstly symbolic meanings clothes carry aid in managing first impressions. The clothes a person wears are understood to indicate that the person is similar to those wearing similar clothes. The second theme Piacentini and Mailer identified was that clothes are used as a mechanism of conforming to social norms or expressing individuality. Thirdly teenagers use clothes to communicate social position. Piacentini and Mailer discovered that teenagers used brands and styles to both express themselves and classify each other.

2.4 Summary

The first part of the literature review presented the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) that this study situates within. After the overview of CCT and the contemporary self that was identified as an identity seeker and maker that uses the symbolic and mythic resources of the marketplace to define himself, this aspect of consumption was discussed. Symbolic consumption recognizes the symbolic and communicative aspect of consumption (e.g. Levy 1959; Belk 1988; Arnould & Thompson 2005) With the presentation of the concept of symbolic consumption its role in the construction of both the self-identity and the social world as Elliott (1997) were reviewed. While the review presented many possible ways of how symbols that have been appropriated to products are used, the finding of Elliott & Wattanasuwan (1998) is perhaps the most important. Their argument that also mediated experiences can serve to construct the self suggests that character customization features in video games can play a role in the construction of self.

3 VIDEO GAMES AS A MEDIUM FOR ADVERTISING

Now as the contemporary view on consumption and symbolic aspect of consumption have been discussed, it is time to consider the context of video games as a medium for advertising. This chapter presents in-game advertising as a phenomenon and introduces character customization features as a form of in-game advertising. As such it points out the commercial interest of including branded products into character customization features in video games.

3.1 People playing video games

While many consider video games as made for kids and teenagers, the reality today is that they are increasingly popular among adults. For example in Finland 15,6% of 30–39 year olds are active video game players and play at least once a month (Karvinen & Mäyrä 2009, 41). Among younger adults video games are even more popular. Research reports from other countries also indicate this. According to Interactive Software Federation of Europe ISFE (2008) some 30% of Europeans aged 16-49 are active players. Figure 1 reports the popularity of video games in Finland in 2009.

	All		Women		Men	
Age	**Players**	**Active**	**Players**	**Active**	**Players**	**Active**
10-19	79,1 %	58,7 %	69,0 %	43,5 %	88,6 %	73,6 %
20-29	73,2 %	38,2 %	79,3 %	28,7 %	67,0 %	47,3 %
30-39	38,2 %	15,6 %	32,9 %	11,9 %	42,7 %	19,0 %
40-49	27,0 %	8,0 %	19,2 %	4,1 %	34,7 %	11,9 %
50-59	2,4 %	0,5 %	1,9 %	0,0 %	290,0 %	1,0 %
60-69	1,8 %	0,6 %	2,3 %	1,1 %	1,2 %	1,2 %
70-75	0,0 %	0,0 %	0,0 %	0,0 %	0,0 %	0,0 %

Figure 1 – Percentage of players and active console game players in Finland (Karvinen & Mäyrä 2009)

Figure 2 reports the time video game players play on a weekly basis according to ISFE (2008). While 16-24 year olds play the most with over 40% of them playing 6-10 hours a week, also a significant amount of 25-39 year olds play video games and over 25% of them play video games 6-10 hours a week. ISFE (2008).

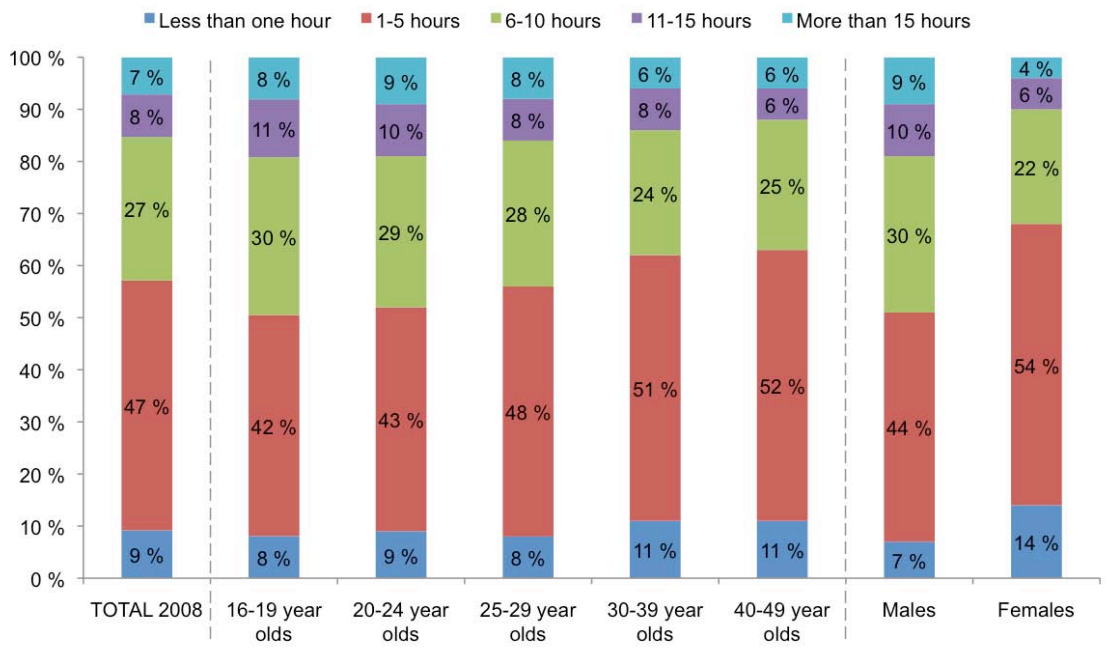

Figure 2 - Time video game players spend playing per week (ISFE 2008)

As figures 1 and 2 demonstrate, video games clearly have a role in the lives of many consumers. Although the data from Finnpanel cannot be compared directly, it is worth noting that 10–24 year-old men watch television some 9 hours a week on average (Finnpanel, 2010).

3.2 In-game advertising

As the computer and video games industry has grown rapidly, video games have also become an interesting medium for advertising (Yang et al. 2006). Advertisers are especially interested in reaching young men playing video games, as they are hard to reach through other media (Nelson 2006). Although advertising in video games has only recently become a big business, video games have been used as marketing tools already

for a long time. In a netnographic study participants of an online discussion forum recalled advertisements in Amiga and Atari games as well as seeing Pizza Hut adverts in Teenage Mutant Ninja Turles game for Nintendo Entertainment system (Nelson et al. 2004). All these mentioned game consoles date back to 1980's. Since then company logos and brands have been visible in various ways. Some games such as *Barbie* (published by High-Tech Expressions, 1991) and *NHL Series* (published every year since 1990 by Electronic Arts*)* have been licensed, while some have included advertisements as billboards (e.g. *FIFA International Soccer*, published by Electronic Arts, 1993). In racing games such as *Gran Turismo 5 Prologue* (published by Sony Computer Entertainment, 2008) players can drive the same car they own or an expensive sports car like Ferrari. Similarly for example skateboarding games such as *Tony Hawk Underground* (published by Activision, 2003) and *Skate 2* (Electronic Arts 2009a) include a possibility for players to customize their character with different brands of clothing and skateboarding equipment.

As the examples above show, in-game advertising can be conducted in a number of ways. The advertiser can choose between making an *advergame,* a game developed specifically for its product or brand, advertising on billboards inside the world of a video game or including its products in the game in the background or to be used by the player. While advertising in video games with billboard adverts certainly differs from inclusion of actual products in the game, literature widely refers to both as in-game product placement or brand placement (e.g. Nelson 2002, Schneider & Cornwell 2005, Molesworth 2006, Yang et al. 2006). Thus from here on I will use the term *brand placement* to refer to advertising and product placement in video games.

3.3 Brand placement in video games

Brand placement, "the paid inclusion of branded products or brand identifiers, through audio and/or visual means within mass media programming" (Karrh 1998, 33) is a growing practice in a number of media vehicles. According to Smit et al. (2009) worldwide spending on brand placement in all media was almost $3.4 billion in 2006 and $4.4 billion in 2007. A part of this growth is coming from increasing brand placement in

video games. This shows in the growth of in-game advertising market that grew from 196 million Euros in 2007 to nearly 315 million Euros in 2008 (Kuutio 2009). Factors driving brand placement forward include success stories of brand placement, consumers' resistance towards adverts, fragmentation of traditional media and marketers growing enchantment with nontraditional media (Balasubramanian et al. 2006).

Brand placements have been argued to have a wide range of possible effects on their audience. According to the literature review of Balasubramanian et al. (2006) placements have been shown to generate short-term memory effects, aid identification with the brand as well as affect purchase intention and brand choice positively. Still the most common method to study the effectiveness of brand placements is measuring audience recall of placed brands (Karrh 1998; Balasubramanian et al. 2006).

3.3.1 Effects of brand placement in video games on brand recognition and recall

As brand placement in video games has become more and more popular, also academics have gotten interested with how this new medium of advertising works and how effective it is. Many of these studies have focused on the effects on players' brand awareness measuring brand recall and recognition. Brand awareness that Hoyer and Brown (1990, 141) define as " a level of brand knowledge involving, at the least, recognition of the brand name" has been argued to be one of the main goals of advertisers when advertising in video games (Yang et al. 2006; Lee & Faber 2007). Of the three classical measures of brand awareness as pointed out by Laurent et al. (1995) brand recall measures consumers' unaided awareness of the brand while brand recognition measures consumers' aided awareness of the brand.

Results have shown that brand placement in video games works, although its efficiency has also been questioned in some studies. For example Nelson (2002) found out that players could recall 25-30% of the brands displayed in background billboards after playing Gran Turismo 2 racing game for 15 minutes and 10–15% after a delay of five months. On the other hand in the study of Lee and Faber (2007) participants recalled

only 12% of the fictitious brands they saw during their playing time of 6 minutes racing around a NASCAR circuit. Similarly Chaney et al. (2004) reached poor results with fictitious brands embedded into a first person shooter (FPS) game.

Still the most interesting of these other studies is one of Yang et al. (2006) that accompanied the effects in-game advertising has on implicit memory in addition to the effects advertising has on explicit memory. Their finding that the effect of in-game advertising is far more on implicit memory than on explicit memory suggests that in-game advertising is considerably more effective than many other studies claim. Lee and Faber (2007) also suggest that research on product placement in games should look at implicit memory as measuring explicit memory only may underrepresent the impact of brand placement in video games. The limited time to play that test participants have had might also affect the results negatively. While players have had only 5-15 minutes playing time in tests, the average playing time for an individual game is some 30 hours in total as Nelson (2002) points out.

3.3.2 Effects of brand placement in video games on brand attitude

In addition to the generation of brand awareness, improving consumers' attitude towards the brand is frequently the aim of brand placement in computer and video games (Nelson 2005). Generally, it seems that brand placements that form an active part of the play experience can affect brand attitude positively. For example in a study using Gran Turismo 4 racing game Mackay et al. (2009) discovered that the experience of driving a Holden Monaro in the game had a significant positive effect on the brand attitude towards Holden among those who were less positively predisposed to Holden brand. Similarly Nelson (2002) received comments that indicated brand placements to affect brand attitude positively with a similar setting. However, it is important to note that not all playing experiences are positive, as the player can also fail in achieving the goal set in the game. Molesworth (2006) notes that in-game encounters with brands can sometimes leave players angry, frustrated and blaming the brand. An example of this kind of an encounter with a brand could be a situation where the player is unable to win a car

race against BMWs driving a Toyota, or not able to score a goal in NHL10 ice hockey game after switching to a CCM hockey stick.

Although brand placements as products, especially when they are an active part of the gaming experience, have been shown to be able to affect players' attitudes toward the brand positively, this is not necessarily the case with all in-game advertising. With billboard adverts the effect can even be negative as the study by Mau et al. (2008, 841) shows. Comparing the effects brand placement has on brand attitude with products of different familiarity placed as billboard adverts into a FPS game, Mau et al. (ibid) discovered that while the change in brand attitude towards an unfamiliar brand was positive, the change was negative for a familiar brand.

3.3.3 Players' attitudes towards brand placement in video games

Perhaps the most important issue, especially from a game developer's point of view is what players think of brand placements in video games as it finally determines whether video games can be used as an advertising medium. While one might consider that players do not want to see advertising when playing a video game, it does not seem to be so. Studies on the subject have discovered that video players are generally positive towards advertising and do not find advertising in video games obtrusive nor consider the practice deceptive (Nelson 2002, 86). However, negative attitudes towards brand placement have also been discovered. For example some participants of a study by Molesworth (2006) labeled product placement as "sneaky" and invasion of privacy, while he came to the same conclusion as Nelson in 2002 that players generally have positive attitudes towards in-game advertising.

Yang et al. (2006) explain the positive attitudes players have with findings of Nebenzahl and Secunda (1993) that brand placements, when compared to traditional adverting, are viewed more positively in general. Another possible explanation for the positive attitudes players have towards brand placements in video games might be that players believe the money made from selling advertising space from a game is spent to make better games as Molesworth (2006) suggests. However players are also somewhat cau-

tious of the long-term impact of successful advertising in video games, for example directing game developers to produce only certain type of games (Molesworth 2006, 363).

Especially when the game world or the setting of the game simulates real world many players see advertising positively. For example Nelson (2002) found out that players thought brand placements add to the realism of the game. Just like in a real NHL ice hockey game where sideboards are filled with advertising players expect to see the adverts also in the games they play. Molesworth (2006) came to the same conclusion as his respondents argued that advertising should exist in simulations because advertising exists in real life. Molesworth's conclusion was that brands help people relate their game experiences to their everyday experiences, as they are symbols of our consumer society. Similarly Pennington (2001) argued that consumers would sense that the virtual reality is incomplete without the inclusion of brands.

Still it is only certain game genres that can include brand placements. As Nelson et al. (2004, 7) point out, some game environments are more authentic with fake brands or no brands at all. The criticism towards brand placements stems from inclusion of brands into environments they do not belong. Indeed it would be "weird to see a flying monkey person wearing Nikes" as one of the respondents in Nelson's (2002, 87) study commented.

3.4 Customization features as brand placement in video games

In video games interaction with brands is in some cases possible in the form of choosing a car in a racing game or choosing equipment or a piece of clothing for the character. The basic idea behind customization features is to offer the player an opportunity to change the appearance of the game character he plays with in the game. These features can be used for example to display one's favorite brands (Nelson 2002). A good example of a game with such features is Skate 2 (Electronic Arts 2009a) that allows players to build their own custom character with a wide range of clothing and skateboarding brands that are in the game. Similarly, in NHL10 (Electronic Arts 2009b) players can equip their own game character with their choice of hockey stick, glove, skate and hel-

met brands. Customization features appear also in racing games, in which the player can not only choose the brand of his car, but also change its appearance with branded spoilers, custom rims and decals. Figure 3 shows an example of how customization features are built in to video games. In the image the player has entered the shop in the game and is making the choice between different brands of clothing. The browser on the left side of the table contains all available products for the player in the chosen category while the currently selected item is shown worn by the player's character on the right side.

Figure 3 - Example of customization features, Slappy's shop in Skate 2

Customization features were first recognized in in-game advertising literature by Nelson (2002, 88) who argued that the features she witnessed in games such as Tony Hawk Pro Skater 2 "may provide for greater brand involvement on the part of players and a better value for advertisers". This was also evident already in her study as Nelson found out that players recalled these car brand they had used in the study better than other brands that were included in the study (2002).

Customization features as presented above can also be referred to as active brand placements. In academic literature the term was introduced by Mackay et al. (2009) who define active brand placement as a form of brand placement where the branded product

forms a natural part of the game-play. This is exactly the case with customization features as the player is often instructed to customize his character when first starting to play the game and later directed back to make changes allowed by his progress in the game. According to Mackay et al. (ibid) active brand placements are efficient not only in generating brand awareness, but also in converting and enhancing players' attitudes toward a brand because the player interacts with the brand and experiences it in the game.

While only Nelson (2002) and Mackay et al. (2009) so far have argued explicitly for customization features as an effective method of brand placement in video games, results from other in-game advertising studies support the use of customization features as a brand placement method in video games as well. Interaction with the brand for example has been recognized to have an affect also by Schneider and Cornwell (2005) who found out that players of a car racing game reported to recall an advert because they crashed into it and then started to look for it to appear again in order to avoid crashing again.

The interaction a player has with the brand when using customization features explains much of why they are such an effective method of in-game advertising. However, other factors, namely involvement level of the player and placement prominence, that have been recognized to affect brand recall of video game players also explain the use of character customization as a form of brand placement in video games.

Involvement level of the player that refers to how immersed into the game the player is has been argued to have a negative effect on brand recall (Grigorovici & Constantin 2004; Nelson et al. 2006; Lee & Faber 2007). Lee and Faber (2007) explain this with the limited capacity model of attention developed by Kahneman that assumes one's total attentional capacity at any point in time to be limited (Kahneman 1973, see Lee & Faber 2007). Their argument is that as the player's primary task is playing the game, only the remaining capacity is available to noticing the brands whereas a person watching television gives more of his attention to what happens on the screen. Finally they argue that the negative effect of involvement is especially problematic with players

highly focused in playing the game who have little to none capacity to notice any brand messages no matter where in the gaming environment they were placed (Lee & Faber 2007).

While the attention required to play the game hinders the player's ability to notice and remember brand placements and adverts while playing the game, this problem does not exist with character customization on many occasions. When character customization features are built into the game, brands are not in the background while the player is focused in playing the game, but in the center of player's attention as the player is directed to choose between different products. This way the player is involved with the choice of brand rather than playing the game, which Nelson (2002) argued to be one of the strengths of using customization features to place brands into games. This is also arguably one of the reasons why Mackay et al. (2009) found out active brand placements to be able to affect player's attitude toward the brand.

Findings on the influence of visual prominence of the advert also support the use of character customization to some extent. Visual prominence of the advert refers to the location where the brands are placed in the game and how clearly it stands out. When an advert or brand placement appears distinctively on the focal visual field of the player, that is when the brands are in the center of the action in the game, it is considered prominent. An example of this is a brand embedded on to the game character which can be in example a person or a car, or a brand that is directly on the way the game character is moving. When the brand or advert appears in the peripheral visual field or in a subtle way, such as an advert on the sideboards of an ice hockey game, it is not visually prominent but a subtle placement. (Schneider & Cornwell, 2005)

Studies on the effects of placement's visual prominence have found out that prominent placements are better recalled than subtle placements. For example, Schneider and Cornwell (2005) discovered that prominent placements were recalled five times better than subtle placements in their study with a racing game. Similarly Lee and Faber (2007) found out that prominent placement of product led to superior recall and recognition when compared to brands that were placed outside the focal visual field. When

brand placements are implemented through customization features, the brands are shown in the focal visual field and the player is focused on looking at the branded product and considering how well it fits his character in the game. Thus character customization features are prominent when the player is making his selection. However placements implemented with customization features are not often focal during game-play as the brand logo is for example on the windshield of the car or in the shoes of the character.

Prominence of a brand placement is also affected by its size and ability to stand out. While Nelson (2002, 88) reached results that argue for the placement size not being a factor affecting placement recall, it seems that the size of the placement affects how well the placement is recalled. For example Schneider and Cornwell (2005) argue that size and brightness of the brand placement do influence brand recall. Molesworth (2006) argues similarly about placing products in the peripheral visual field in the game. In fact he sees that brands placed in the peripheral visual field might not be noticed at all even during extended periods of gaming, as player's focus is in the game and the focal visual field. These findings align with research on brand placements in movie industry that have shown prominent placements to be more effective than subtle placements (Gupta & Lord 1998).

3.5 Summary

The second chapter of the literature review has presented a review of video games as a medium for marketing. The chapter began with a brief summary about the role of video games today. The data showed that while video games are no longer played by teenage boys only, men under 30 years old still are the most active video game players. As such it is no surprise that advertisers now see video games a potential medium to reach this demographic as Nelson et al. (2006) point out. The increased attention towards in-game advertising is also partly explained by advertisers' increasing interest with new media and brand placement that Balasubramanian et al. (2006) note.

After in-game advertising as a phenomenon and its current state of were presented, more attention was directed toward its effectiveness. Most important studies regarding brand placement in video games were also reviewed to better understand how in-game advertising works. Brand placement in video games is understood to affect both brand awareness and recognition (Nelson 2002; Lee & Faber 2007) as well as brand attitude (Molesworth 2006; Mackay et al. 2009). Players' attitudes towards in-game advertising were also discussed. In general players have positive attitudes towards brand placement in video games and feel that it contributes to the realism of the game when it is well implemented (Nelson 2002; Molesworth 2006).

With knowledge on the effectiveness of brand placement in video games reviewed the special case of brand placement through customization features was addressed. The review showed that existing knowledge on effective advertising in video games supports implementing brand placement through customization features. As players interact with brands, the brands are experienced and thus they can shift brand attitudes (Schneider & Cornwell 2005; Mackay et al. 2009). Character customization features also have the ability to get the players' attention to the brands and as the character is customized, brands are prominent. Both attention of the player (Grigorovici & Constantin 2004; Nelson 2006) and prominence of the advert (Schneider & Cornwell 2005; Lee & Faber 2007) were earlier recognized to affect the effectiveness of brand placement in video games.

4 EXPERIENCE OF PLAYING A VIDEO GAME

As the last part of this literature, it is time to move on to study how virtual experiences in video games come to be as well as how players might use character customization features. The chapter begins by first considering the reasons why people play video games. Next, the concept of presence, which is viewed as critical for interactive virtual experiences such as sensing to be inside the game and consuming a product virtually, is introduced. After this possible ways of self-presentation are introduced. Finally, current knowledge on virtual consumption in computer and video games is presented before a concluding summary of the whole literature review.

4.1 Multiple reasons for playing video games

The appeal of video games is said to come from the enjoyment of the game and it has consistently been shown to be so (Raney et al. 2006, 166-167). Various studies have found players reacting to playing a video game with increased arousal. For example Calvert and Tan (1994) reported a significant increase in heart rate and self-reported arousal of college students playing a video game. While enjoyment is a motivation in itself as Raney (ibid) argues, and to some extent explains why people play video games, it is not a conclusive explanation. The roots of this enjoyment and other explanations for playing video games are discussed next.

A survey conducted by Entertainment Software Association ESA (2001, see Kirremuir & McFarlane 2004) offers some additional information about why games are played. The survey showed that while the number one reason for playing video games is that they are fun, the challenge games offer was also an important reason to play them. Other important reasons were that games offer an interactive social experience that can be shared with friends and family as well as provide a lot of entertainment value for the money. Similar findings have also been made in academic studies. Sherry et al. (2006, 217-219) identify six dominant dimensions of video game use that include arousal, challenge, competition, diversion, fantasy and social interaction.

Klug and Schell (2006, 92-97) present five different explanations for why people play video games based on their review of findings by game theorists. This review offers a good starting point for better understanding why games are played. First of the explanations Klug and Schell (ibid) present is *the control over the environment* video games allow when compared to other forms of popular entertainment. As such games do not only offer an escape from the real world, but a possibility to become an agent in the world of the game. As players progress in the game their decisions have influence in that world that gives them enjoyment. This argument is quite similar to that of Klimmt and Hartmann (2006) who argue that effectance motivation, the enjoyment of imposing an effect on their environment is one of the main reasons for people playing video games.

The second explanation for playing video games Klug and Schell (2006, 94) argue for is *the possibility to experience something the player knows of but otherwise only as an observer.* With this they refer to games that allow replaying or simulating upcoming or historic real life events. By playing sports video games players can for instance experience playing professional sports with the stars they look up to or try to manage their favorite team. For example Kim et al. (2008) discovered that players continuously selected their favorite teams and athletes. This type of playing can also strengthen the connection the player has with his favorite team as Kim et al. (ibid) point out.

Many video games also offer a *possibility to live elsewhere and elsewhen*, which Klug and Schell (2006, 94) appoint as their third explanation for people to play video games. According to them people who enjoy this aspect of video gaming enjoy the possibility of escaping the real world. Other researchers have made similar arguments as well. For example Molesworth (2006) suggests that video games may be a resource with which individuals may create and explore their consumer daydreams and fantasies. Also Kim and Ross (2006) identified satisfying needs and wants that cannot be fulfilled in real life sporting context to be one major reason for playing sports video games.

Competing against other players as well as against the computer artificial intelligence is also one of the main explanations for why people enjoy playing video games that

Klug and Schell (2006, 95) present. They maintain that for players enjoying the competition, playing video games offers a possibility to win and prove to themselves they are better than others. Furthermore they argue that in some cases success in video games may even be a substitute for social acceptance and success in the real world for these types of players. Raney et al. (2006) make a similar argument pointing out that mastery of a game can serve as a source of self-esteem and pride, especially for younger players. Finally, Klug and Schell (2006, 95) argue that people playing video games for competition and to master challenges are very similar in nature to those who play competitive real-life sports as they seek the adrenaline rush from competition and have a strong desire to win. In fact, many professional athletes enjoy playing sports video games as Klug and Schell (ibid) point out.

As their fifth explanation for why people play video games Klug and Schell (2006, 96) present that *people play games to explore fantasy relationships safely*. Especially role-playing video games offer a possibility for such as they often include a story and in the case of massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG) also a possibility to interact with other people. Players use these possibilities for example to try alternative behavior as Klug and Schell (ibid) demonstrate, presenting the case of a female player who acted promiscuously in the virtual world of game contrary to her behavior in the real world.

While Klug and Schell (2006) do not identify the social interaction as a separate explanation for why people games, they play an important role in the latter two of their five explanations for why people play video games. The social interaction games provide is an important factor to many players. Video games are nowadays often used as a reason to get together and spend time with friends. (Sherry et al. 2006; Chou & Tsai 2006)

4.2 Presence in a virtual environment

The concept of a perception of nonmediation in a virtual environment has been discussed in literature with quite a few terms. Words like presence, virtual presence, telepresence and subjective presence have been used to refer to basically the same con-

cept although with some slight differences (Tamborini 2000, see Tamborini & Skalski 2006). Since a general agreement of the concept exist, the word *presence* is used here to refer to a perception of a mediated experience as nonmediated (Lombard & Ditton 1997).

Although Lombard and Ditton (1997) present a unifying definition for presence, they also recognize six interrelated but distinct conceptualizations of presence. According to them these six conceptualizations describe presence either as *transportation, social richness, realism, immersion, social actor within medium* or as *medium as social actor*. Tamborini and Skalski (2006) connect these to three dimensions of presence drawing from a number of classifications presented in literature. These dimensions are *spatial presence, social presence* and *self-presence* and they all play a role in the experience of playing a video game (ibid).

4.2.1 Spatial presence

The dimension of *spatial presence* that Tamborini and Skalski (2006, 227) present refers to a sense of being physically located in a virtual environment. For example in a racing game context *high spatial presence* means that the player no longer recognizes sitting on the couch but thinks he is sitting in the car racing and racing on the track.

Modern day video games with high quality 3D graphics and constant interaction between the gaming environment and the player have an exceptionally high capability to produce spatial presence. Steuer (1992) argues that the properties of the medium that influence the sense of presence are *vividness* and *interactivity*. With vividness, Steuer refers to the ability of a technology to produce sensorially rich mediated environment. Interactivity refers to the degree to which users of a medium can influence the form or content of the mediated environment.

Researchers have also recognized that the characteristics of the individual experiencing the environment play a role in experiencing a mediated environment as unmediated. For example Steuer (1992) argues that *willingness to suspend ones disbelief* is one of the major factors that affect the sense of presence. Other factors that have been recognized

include *knowledge of and prior experience with the medium*, *personality type*, *level of sensation-seeking*, *need to overcome loneliness*, *mood before and during media use*, and finally *age and gender* (Lombard & Ditton 1997).

4.2.2 Social presence

The second dimension of presence Tamborini and Skalski (2006, 230) argue for is *social presence* that they define as a sense of being with other social actors when interacting with virtual actors. In video games social presence is experienced by interaction with either computer or human controlled characters in the game.

The sense of social presence has been argued to be a multidimensional construct (Biocca et al. 2003, 473). While Biocca, Harms and Burgoon (ibid) recognize three distinct views on how social presence is perceived that are *copresence*, *psychological involvement* or *behavioral engagement* in their literature review, they posit that these conceptualizations all lead to a sense of social presence when they occur. The conceptualization of social presence as *copresence* refers to a sensory awareness of an embodied other, while the conceptualization of *psychological involvement* refers to a sense of intelligence of the other. Finally *behavioral engagement* emphasizes interactive behavior as the source of social presence. (Biocca et al. 2003)

Supporting the multidimensional construct of social presence that Biocca et al. (2003) present, Tamborini and Skalski (2006) argue that video games can create a sense of social presence through all these dimensions. According to them most games can generate copresence as they include visible others, while advances in artificial intelligence programmed into video games add to psychological involvement of players. Finally, they argue that online gaming that allows talking and chatting with other players adds significantly to the dimension of behavioral engagement.

4.2.3 Self-presence

Self-presence, the third dimension of presence as presented by Tamborini and Skalski (2006) refers to a state in which video game players experience their virtual self as if it

were their actual self. The concept of self-presence was first introduced by Biocca (1997), who argued that in almost any virtual environment there are three bodies present: the objective body, the virtual body and the body schema. According to Biocca the representation of the user's body in the virtual environment may influence the mental representation of the user's body and his identity.

The capability of video games to create a sense of self-presence seems to be well connected with their capability to produce a sense of spatial presence. For example Tamborini & Skalski (2006) point out that 3D graphics as well as first-person point of view are major contributors to a sense of self-presence. New video gaming technologies that closely map user's body movement are also seen as highly capable in creating a sense of telepresence (Biocca 1997).

4.3 Self-representation in the virtual environment

Customization features that are built into video games not only offer a possibility to display one's favorite brands (Nelson 2002) or explore consumer daydreams (Molesworth 2006) but also to situate oneself into the video game. This is implemented for example by offering the player a possibility to name the character as well as edit the physical attributes of the character. Such behavior is referred to as self-representation (Neustaedter & Fedorovskaya 2009) and it is closely linked with the feeling of self-presence and presence in a virtual environment. Self-presentation refers to the complex intraself negotiations that social actors engage in to project a desired impression (Goffman 1959, see Schau & Gilly 2003). This self-presentation occurs daily as consumers select clothes, hairstyles, automobile, logos, and so forth to impress others in any given context (Schau and Gilly 2003).

While self-representation has not been studied in offline video games, studies exist on self-representation in different virtual environments. Schau and Gilly (2003) have studied self-presentation in personal web spaces. They present personal web spaces as venues for social presence at a distance, that consumers use to communicate their multiple, situational selves. In their research Schau and Gilly (ibid) identify four self-presentation

strategies people have in constructing their web space. These categories include (1) *constructing a digital self*, (2) *projecting a digital likeness*, (3) *digital association*, and (4) *reorganizing linear narrative structures*.

The first strategy of c*onstructing a digital self* refers to consumers using their personal websites to present who they are by for example displaying their possessions, while the second strategy, *projecting a digital likeness* refers to the explicit referencing of a real or ideal physical body in the construction of the digital self with pictures and textual descriptions. The third strategy, *digital association* refers to effort to reference relationships with objects and places. Here it is important to note that in the virtual environment of their personal web spaces consumer have no financial or physical constraints when constructing and managing their impressions. Finally, the fourth strategy, *reorganizing linear narrative structures* refers to how hyperlinking allows narratives such as life stories or resumes to be told only in detail when the user clicks the link. (Schau & Gilly 2003)

While the study of Schau and Gilly (2003) was based on how personal web spaces are constructed, Messinger et al. (2009) have studied self-representation in the virtual world of Second Life (SL). SL is a virtual world where its residents can manipulate the environment, own and trade objects and land, participate in group activities, work, explore and interact socially with their avatars (Messinger et al. 2009). Here *Avatar* refers to a graphical presentation of a person with which members participate in virtual worlds (Messinger et al. 2009, 204). Their study revealed that although people indicated that their avatars' appearance tends to be similar to their real world appearance, there is a general tendency to make the avatar somewhat more attractive than the real self. This finding of Messinger et al. (2009) is similar to that of Schau and Gilly (2003) in that people seem to present themselves usually somewhat consistently with their real life selves in virtual environments.

The typology Neustaedter and Fedorovskaya (2009) present on the ways SL virtual world users create their characters, offers the most comprehensive picture on self-presentation in virtual environments. According to Neustaedter and Fedorovskaya

(2009) there are four types of users in virtual worlds. These types are (1) *realistics*, (2) *ideals*, (3) *fantasies*, and (4) *roleplayers*. *Realistics* are the people who want their virtual world identities to be the same with their real life identities whereas *idealists* aim to overcome their perceived inadequacies in their avatar while still having the same personality in the virtual world and real life. For *fantasies* avatars offer a possibility to have two separate identities. Their desire to have an alternate identity in the virtual world reflects in their avatar's appearance. Finally *roleplayers* use virtual worlds to experience it as someone else or to experience situations they cannot normally experience. The main difference between *roleplayers* and *fantasies* is that roleplayers constantly fulfill new fantasies and do not maintain their virtual world identity. (Neustaedter & Fedorovskaya 2009)

4.4 Virtual consumption behavior

In a number of video games customizing one's game character is implemented by a simulated shopping experience, where the player has the possibility to browse through a collection of clothes and/or equipment and buy different items with in-game currency. This type of simulated shopping and commodity consumption in video games has been referred to as virtual consumption (e.g. Molesworth 2006; Lehdonvirta et al. 2009). The study of virtual consumption offers another view on how video game players consume in video games.

The limited amount of research on virtual consumption and purchase behavior of virtual items that exists has focused mainly on massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) and social online worlds. This needs to be noted as video games are often played offline and alone. It is also worth noting that the items players obtain when customizing their character are not paid for in real and cannot be sold to another party, while in social online worlds like Habbo Hotel and Second Life players pay for their virtual goods with real money. In video games it is more typical that the player pays for his virtual goods with virtual currency he has earned by completing missions in the game. However, some video games have recently introduced the possibility of pay-

ing real money for enhanced customization possibilities (e.g. Skate 2, Shaun White Snowboarding).

Molesworth (2006) is one of the first researchers who has commented on how players consume in video games. Molesworth argues that virtual consumption can serve as a resource for consumers to explore a wider range of tastes and desires. He continues that consumption in video games can also be about fantasizing about products the player may never have the possibility or willingness to buy. Finally Molesworth argues that consuming virtually can even satisfy the desire to consume (2006, 358).

The study of Guo and Barnes (2009) is one of the few studies that have focused on virtual consumption behavior. Guo and Barnes (ibid) identify three distinct motivations for pursuing virtual items in virtual worlds. These motivations are *perceived playfulness*, *character competency* and *the requirements of the quest system*. Perceived playfulness refers to players' internal motives for pursuing virtual items. When a player enjoys the game he is more interested in obtaining new virtual items for the game character. With character competency Guo and Barnes refer to the skills and abilities of the players' game character. For example when a game-character is weak, players have a stronger need to develop them by pursuing new items. Esteem needs of players that can be satisfied with a highly capable game-character also have role in making character competency a motivational factor for pursuing new virtual items. Finally, the requirements of the quest system motivate players to pursue new items. The quest system refers to the game's logic: to complete a certain task in a game a game-character needs to complete other tasks to obtain the required skills and items. Sometimes these items can also be bought, so the motivation comes from the need for progress in the game.

While the model Guo and Barnes (2009) present offers a comprehensive explanation for pursuing virtual items, spending money on virtual items and finally on the aspects players are most concerned about when making a specific purchase, it has been criticized. According to Lehdonvirta (2009), the model offers a mechanistic view of user motivations and is confined to only certain MMORPGs. Lehdonvirta (ibid) himself offers an alternative explanation for purchase behavior in virtual worlds. Based on his study con-

ducted in social virtual worlds and MMORPGs, he argues that the purchase drivers can be divided into *functional attributes* and *hedonic and social attributes*.

With functional attributes, Lehdonvirta (2009) refers to paying for better *performance.* Players pay for companies in MMORPGs such as World of Warcraft to develop their character. Money is also spent to acquire *new functions* such as recording game play or added functions for editing replay material like in Skate 2 video game. Player also spend money on *convenience* and *game play options* so that they don't have to spend time developing a developing a character or opening new missions as they can also be bought.

As hedonic and social attributes Lehdonvirta (2009) recognizes seven different drivers. Players are for example willing to purchase items because of their *visual appearance and specific sounds,* as they both enjoy their aesthetic qualities and offer a possibility to differentiate from other players. *Background fiction* such as a story a player finds fascinating can be a driver for purchase of certain items. Similarly *provenance*, the origin and history of an item makes an item wanted by certain consumers like in the real world where people pay even thousands of dollars for game-worn jerseys of the best athletes. More social attributes such as *customizability, cultural references and branding* are all drivers that make virtual items suitable for creating and communicating social distinctions and bonds. Finally the most social attribute is *rarity* of a virtual item, which can also make it a desirable item as it becomes a status symbol for its owner in the virtual world.

4.5 Summary

The literature review presented in the preceding chapters of this study has already provided a lot of insight into how consumption in video games through character customization features occurs. This summary aims to form a synthesis of the concepts and findings presented.

First, the motivation to play video games was assessed. Based on the literature review games are played for multiple reasons that may affect how symbolic consumption oc-

curs, as players use customization features in video games. After considering why games are played, the concept of presence that is understood as a critical concept to the type of interactive entertainment found in video games (Tamborini & Skalski 2006) was reviewed. A sense of presence, which video games were shown to be very capable of producing through 3D graphics and interaction with objects and other characters, makes it possible for the player to experience being inside the game world or being the character in the game world. This sense is further supported by customization features. Here the argument of Biocca (1997), that the sense of self-presence can have implications to players' s mental representation of his body and identity aligns with the view of Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998) that also mediated experiences can play a role in the construction of one's self. This further suggests that the consumption that takes place in video games can be symbolic.

After presenting the concept of presence knowledge on self-presentation in virtual environments was reviewed. Based on studies from other virtual environments, character customization and symbolic resources are not only employed to create an accurate representation of one's real identity, but also to present ideal identities, to fantasize with other identities or for role playing (Neustaedter & Fedorovskaya 2009). Thus video games also might offer a possibility to construct possible selves (Markus and Nurius 1986). The concept of a multifaceted self that consumer culture theorists (Firat & Venkatesh 1995; Arnauld & Thompson 2005) argue for also fits with the typology Neustaedter and Fedorovskaya (2009) present. However, it is also important to note here that the typology Neustaedter and Fedorovskaya (2009) present is based on a virtual world where social interaction is the main reason for usage, while video games are played for a number of reasons.

Current knowledge on virtual consumption behavior was finally introduced as the last part of the literature review. The findings of Lehdonvirta's (2009) that also hedonistic and social drivers affect virtual consumer behavior in addition to functional drivers in online multiplayer games indicate that consumption in video games has a symbolic aspect. According to him players consume in-game items for example as status symbols. Arguments of Molesworth (2006) that virtual consumption can be used for example to

explore a wider range of tastes and desires or to fantasize, indicate that products have symbolic meanings also in the virtual world of game.

Based on this literature review it can be argued that the symbolic aspect of consumption influences character customization in video games. The symbolic consumption that takes place in video games through character customization is understood to be influenced by both the reasons for playing the video game and the experience the player gets from playing a video game. This study continues with an empirical study on how video game players symbolically consume through character customization. The answer to this question is sought with the sub-questions "why video game players spend time customizing their character in the game?", "what is the relationship between the character and player's identity?" , "which drivers affect players' choices?" and finally "how players view branded character customization?"

5 METHODOLOGY

This chapter introduces the methodology of this study. First, the cultural approach this study takes is briefly introduced. Second, the data collection method used in the study is presented. Interview design, sample and the conducted interviews are also presented here. Finally, the third part of this chapter introduces the analysis method of this study.

5.1 Cultural approach to consumer research

This study takes a cultural approach to marketing and consumer research. The cultural approach is based on the assumption that we live in a culturally constituted world where this constitution largely takes place in and through the marketplace (Moisander & Valtonen 2006, 7). This approach aligns with the Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould & Thompson 2005) that is adopted in this study, as their definition of consumer culture "denotes a social arrangement in which the relations between lived culture and social resources, and between meaningful ways of life and the symbolic resources on which they depend, are mediated through markets." (Arnould & Thompson 2005, 869). The cultural approach pays attention to cultural structures, particularly to structures-in- use (Moisander & Valtonen 2006, 13). Here the interest is in cultural structures of playing video games and using customization features as this research is focused on how consumption takes place in video game as players consume through character customization.

According to Moisander and Valtonen (2006) there are no absolute or objective criteria for good cultural research. Instead of evaluating a research conventionally in terms of validity, reliability and generalizability, their view is that "the criteria for evaluating the quality of a study are rooted in the specifics of the theoretical and methodological perspective chosen for the study" (Moisander & Valtonen 2006, 21). Moisander and Valtonen (ibid) suggest that good epistemic practice is about formulating appropriate research questions, defining a clear theoretical and methodological perspective, building on, challenging and contributing to existing literature, using appropriate analytical proce-

dures for rigorous and insightful analysis, practical relevance and theoretical contribution.

5.2 Semi-structured interview as a data collection method

As soon as I was set on my research question as *"How do video game players symbolically consume through character customization?* I started to consider what kind of an approach should I take and which research method I should use in my study. After some consideration it was clear to me that *a qualitative research* would suit my research question, as qualitative research is more suitable when the aim of the study is to interpret and understand a phenomenon whereas most quantitative approaches are focused on testing hypotheses or statistical analysis (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 4). Further consideration led to choosing a cultural approach to consumer research for this study.

According to Moisander and Valtonen (2006) in cultural marketing and consumer research, empirical analysis is based on textual and visual materials that are analyzed as cultural texts. These texts and visual materials can be collected for example by studying media, collecting fieldnotes or by different kinds of interviews. For this study, interviews were chosen as the data collection method as they were considered most suitable for producing cultural text about this phenomenon. The issue why observing that Blaxter et al. (2006) and Moisander and Valtonen (2006) suggest as a possible data collection method is not suitable for this study lies in the nature of playing video games. Video games are usually played at home and occasionally, so gaining access to participants' homes would have posed a significant problem for using observation as a data collection method. The possibility to use naturally occurring textual materials such as discussions on Internet discussion forums was also considered, but such material was not found. Finally, the decision to conduct the study with interviews was further strengthened by the notion of (Moisander & Valtonen 2006, 72) that interviews can be useful in gathering data for cultural research if viewed as jointly produced by the interviewees and the interviewer.

Silverman (2001, 87) recognizes three approaches to interview studies. He divides interview studies into *positivist, emotionalist and constructionist* studies that are all interested in different types of issues. While positivist approach is said to be interested in finding out the facts, like how something happened trying to form a true picture based on how interviewees describe the issue, emotionalist view is more interested in the experiences of participants in a situation. The constructionist approach focuses on how meanings are produced in the interview situation. As such these different approaches have been said to answer to different types of questions (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). Based on the research problem in this study *a constructionist approach* for interviewing was considered appropriate as the interviews were focused on understanding the process of customization and the meaning it has to players.

According to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) a constructionist approach requires a semi-structured or an unstructured interview design. Compared to unstructured interview method the semi-structured interview method has the advantage of producing rather systematic data for analysis, while the design still allows individually important topics to be mentioned and discussed about. (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008) Thus semi-structured interviewing is used in the interviews of this study.

5.2.1 Interview design

In semi-structured interviews one major challenge is forming interview questions out of research questions. Gillham (2005) recommends that a researcher should try to consider what dimensions there are for his topic, and then move on to consider how these topics should be covered. Gillham continues that the researcher should develop questions that are distinct enough from each other so that the interviewee does not feel like he has already answered the question.

In formation of the questions used in interviews Gillham (2005) underlines the importance of tying the questions into each other so that one question leads to another. This type of forming questions facilitates flown in the discussion and makes the situation more natural to the interviewee. Another technique that suits for semi-structured interviews is to use related questions to move on to a topic that might be otherwise hard to

discuss (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). The interview frame used in the interviews is attached as appendix A.

5.2.2 Interview sample

In determining the proper sample size for the study multiple issues were considered. According to Saaranen-Kauppinen and Puusniekka (2006) the size of the sample needed in any qualitative research is to some extent determined by the scope of the study. This is due to the time-consuming nature of analyzing data. For qualitative research, where the objective of study is to understand a phenomenon even one interview can sometimes be enough (ibid).

In any study, sample selection is guided by the objective of the study (Saaranen-Kauppinen and Puusniekka 2009). As this study is interested in how video game players use customization features participants had to be experienced with customization in the two games – Skate 2 (Electronic Arts 2009a) and NHL10 (Electronic Arts 2009b) – that were chosen as examples of games with customization features. Age of the participants was not considered an issue as the literature review showed that people from all age groups play video games (ISFE 2008; Karvinen & Mäyrä 2009). Finally, finding different types of players was considered desirable for this study.

With these issues in mind, purposive sampling was used to find suitable participants for the interviews. Participants were sought from multiple sources. Invitations to participate were posted on various Internet discussion forums focusing on different issues. These forums included a forum for Mac enthusiasts, hopeinenomena.net, a forum dedicated to hip-hop and electronic music basso.fi, a forum focused on video games konsolinet.fi and a skateboarding forum hangup.fi. Participants were also sought from video game and skateboarding shops, and one of the interviewees was approached during a junior level ice hockey game. Finally, seven video game players who were familiar with Skate 2 and/or NHL10 video games.volunteered for this study. Figure 4 presents background information on each participant.

Interviewee	Juha	Markus	Otto	Erik
Age	17	18	24	26
Weekly playing (hours)	15-20	10-15	3-4	5
Games played	Skate 2, FIFA10, NHL09 GTA Liberty City Stories	e.g. Skate 2, NHL09, NFS Pro Street, FIFA10, Little Big Planet, Ratchet & Clank	e.g. NHL10, Skate 2, Army of Two, UFC Undisputed, FIFA10	NHL10, Skate 2, Call of Duty 4, Shaun White Snowboarding
Other hobbies, including former	Snowboarding, skateboarding, ice hockey	Photography, tennis, playing trumpet & piano, skateboarding	Boxing, skate-boarding, judo, brasilian jiu-jitsu	Gym, mountain biking, ice hockey, skate-boarding

Interviewee	Mika	Teemu	Timo
Age	17	22	26
Weekly playing (hours)	2-4	5-10	5-10
Games played	e.g. NHL10, racing games	e.g. Skate 2, Call of Duty 5	e.g. Skate 2, Street Fighter 4, FPS games
Other hobbies, including former	Ice hockey, golf	Skateboarding, Blogging	Skateboarding

Figure 4 - Background information about participants

As figure 4 shows, the seven participants who were found for this study were all young men. Youngest participant was 17 years old, while the oldest one was 26 years old. As such the participants represent the most active demographic of video game players regarding their age. However the participants differed from each other remarkably in weekly playing time as two of the participants reported to play under five hours a week, whereas the most active players told they spend over 15 hours a week playing video games. Interestingly all participants told they either had been or still were involved in similar activities the games depict. All of the participants who had played Skate 2 told they had skateboarded in the past or that they still skateboarded. However, only two of

the participants told they still were active skateboarders, while the other four pointed out that it was a thing of their past. In addition, three out of five participants who had played NHL10 had played ice hockey for several years.

Although all the participants found for this study represent a relatively small age group and they had some similarities in their background, the sample is considered suitable for this study as the participants reported significantly varying weekly playing times. The similarities in the participants' background are considered to indicate that the games chosen for this study interest people that are familiar with the context of the game. Knowledge application and identification with sport that Kim and Ross (2006) recognize as factors of motivation to play video games support this notion. However, the background of these participants should be taken into account when considering the transferability of the results of this study.

5.2.3 Conduction of the interviews

The seven interviews that were conducted for this study were all conducted in March 2010. Although this study is in English, all interviews were conducted in Finnish that was the native language of all interviewees. Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to one hour with an approximate length of 40 minutes. All interviews were recorded with the interviewees' permission, and each participant was assured of anonymity and confidentiality as Gillham (2005, 14) suggests. All the names have been changed to ensure the promised anonymity. As compensation for their participation a free video game was given to one randomly selected interviewee after all interviews were completed. Also refreshments such as coffee or a soft drink were offered to those interviewed face-to-face.

Of the seven interviews five were conducted face-to-face interviews at cafeterias. Two interviews were not conducted face-to-face, but with webcams and Skype VoIP calling service instead, as the participants lived in Lahti and Turku. While phone interviews are more suitable for structured interviews, Hirsjärvi and Hurme (1998) point out that phone interviews are also suitable for semi-structured interviews, especially when the long distance between the interviewer and the interviewee poses a problem. However,

phone interviews are not ideal in their opinion as they lack the visual cues that are part of a traditional interview. For example, it can be hard to know whether the interviewee is silent because he has nothing to say or because he is still thinking. In addition, Robson (1995) argues that the lack of visual cues may cause problems with interpretation. This problem was partially avoided in this research by using webcams, as it was possible to see interviewees' reactions to different questions.

5.3 Data analysis method

The objective of an analysis is usually understood to make sense of a data set and develop an interpretation of the phenomena the data dealt with (Moisander & Valtonen 2006, 102). Generally speaking, analyzing refers to systematic or methodical examination of data. An analysis can be performed for example by separating the object of analysis into parts and studying their interrelations to learn something about the object. (Moisander & Valtonen 2006, 101). In this study the interpretive process draws from hermeneutic philosophy following Moisander and Valtonen (2006, 107-124). The concepts of pre-understanding and hermeneutic circle are central to this interpretive process.

Cultural research is based on a non-objectivist view of meaning (Moisander & Valtonen 2006, 107). As such the text does not possess any true meaning itself, meanings are negotiated in the act of interpretation instead. The interpretation of a text is a dialogue with the text and the researcher. This means that texts are open to multiple interpretations that are based on the researcher's pre-understandings. (Moisander & Valtonen 2006, 107-109) In cultural research the task of the interpreter is not to free himself of his own tradition, but rather to examine his inherited and unreflectively held pre-understandings that shape his efforts to understand (ibid).

As the interpretation is understood partly as a product of the interpreter's pre-understanding it is imperative here to consider me as an interpreter. According to Moisander and Valtonen (2006, 109) interpretation is shaped by two sets of pre-understandings of the interpreter, that are the interepreter's temporally, socially and cul-

turally conditioned knowledge on the subject matter and the disciplinary acedemic knowledge. In this case my culturally conditioned knowledge on character customization is based largely on my own gaming experiences since 1998 when I customized my Formula One racing cars in MicroProse's Grand Prix 2 racing game. Since then, I have enjoyed using customization features in multiple games including the games used in this study. My academic knowledge on this subject is based on my marketing studies and the articles and books I have studied for this research during this year.

Hermeneutic circle refers to an iterative part-to-whole mode of interpretation, and is based on the idea that in order to understand a part of something an inquirer must grasp the whole context. (Moisander & Valtonen 2006, 111). In this process the initial understanding of the whole evolves and changes as specific elements are studied again and again. In cultural research, it is the cultural discourses and practices that are analyzed as reflexively constituting each other. (ibid) In this study the interest is in the practice of symbolic consumption in the environment of a video game.

In this study, the analysis of the empirical data began by first listening each interview recording right after the interview. After listening the interviews were each transcribed word by word to be able to analyze also the language of the texts that is important in cultural research (Moisander & Valtonen 2006, 114). Once all data was transcribed, the analysis continued by reading and re-reading all the material and making notes rigorously to identify different themes, categories and the vocabulary participants used when talking about their character customization. Chapter six presents the empirical research and findings of this study.

6 EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

This chapter presents the empirical research of this study. The chapter begins with introductions of the games used in the study – *Skate 2* and *NHL10* –as the study is based on participants' experiences of character customization of those games. The description of the game aims to provide assistance for those interested in transferability of the results of this study. A thick description of the research situation is considered to improve the transferability of the research findings and conclusions as well as the reliability of the research (Moisander & Valtonen 2006). After introducing the games, the empirical findings of this study are presented.

6.1 Games used in the study: Skate 2 & NHL10

The interviews were based on two games – *Skate 2* and *NHL10* – to study how video game players use customization features in video games. These games were chosen as they were considered good examples of how customization features are built into video games. More importantly these two games were chosen as they present two different types of games since in Skate 2 the player controls only one character while in NHL10 the player controls the whole team on the ice. Also, the games differ in the representation of the character. In Skate 2 the character is very prominent in the screen while in NHL10 the character player controls in relatively small. Short descriptions of the game are presented to give a better understanding of the gaming experience. The descriptions are based on playing and studying the games as well their websites. More information is available from the websites of these games listed in references as Electronic Arts 2009a (Skate 2) and Electronic Arts 2009b (NHL10).

6.1.1 Skate 2

Skate 2 (Electronic Arts 2009a) skateboarding game is the second game in the Skate series developed by Electronic Arts. The game continues the story that started in the first Skate game. Situated in the fictional city of New San Vanelona, the game begins as the main character is released from prison where he ended up for breaking the law by

skateboarding. The game tries to create a feeling that the player is in the game by not displaying the character's face until the intro video finishes and the game enters the screen where the player is instructed to edit the character as he wishes and choose clothes for his character. After the player is finished editing his character it is time for skateboarding. The game world is open and the player can choose whether to play the story mode or just skate freely around New San Vanelona. Figure 5 is an example of what a player sees when playing the game. The character closest to the camera is the one controlled by the player.

Figure 5 - Skate 2 gameplay

The story mode builds around challenges the player has to beat in order to progress and become a skateboarding pro. By completing challenges the character also earns money and finally gets sponsors and more products become available in the shop so that the player can change his character's appearance more freely.

Online features in Skate 2 are extensive. In addition to playing online with other players, players can also upload their skateboarding photographs and videos to Skate.reel service where other players can view and rate them. This service can be accessed both from the game as well as from the Internet.

6.1.2 NHL10

NHL10 (Electronic Arts 2009b) is the 19th installment in the NHL series developed and published by EA Sports. The game lets the player play ice hockey with real NHL teams and players. In NHL10 the player controls players of an ice hockey team one at the time as the team plays against another team controlled either by computer or another player. Figure 6 provides an example of what a player sees when playing the game. Here the player controls the rightmost character indicated with the arrow on top of the character.

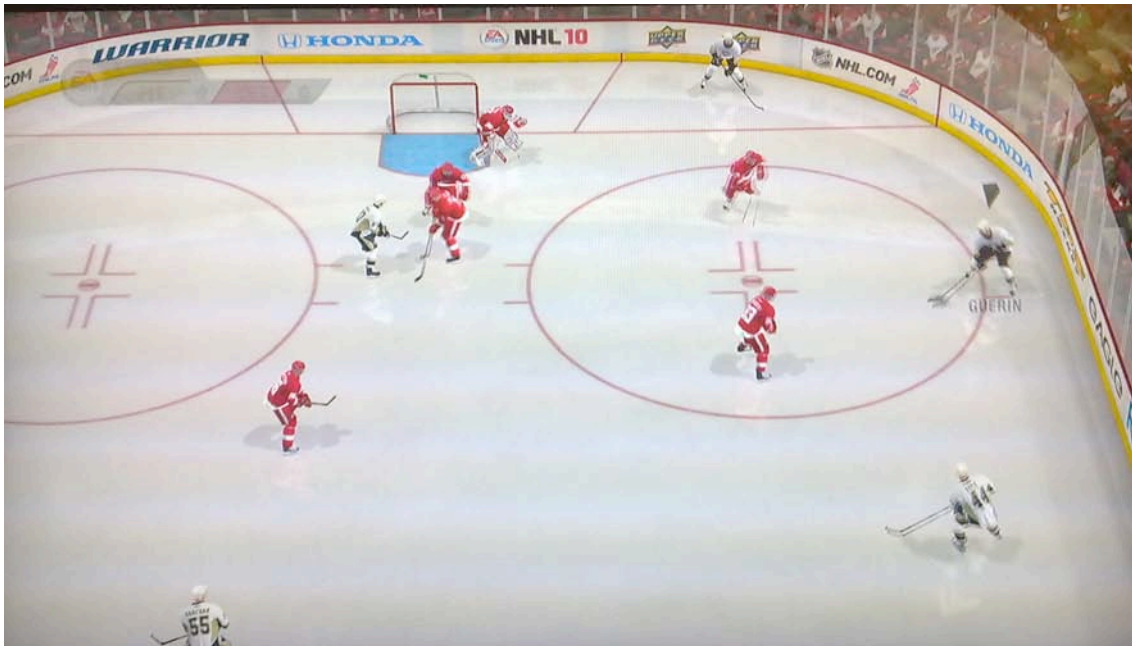

Figure 6 - NHL10 gameplay

In addition to the season mode where the player controls an entire team NHL10 also includes a "be-a-pro" mode that allows the player to either step into the shoes of an NHL pro like Teemu Selänne or to make his own character. After choosing his character the player is allowed to customize it with different brands of equipment just as in Skate 2. When playing in the "be-a-pro" mode the player can choose to control only his own pro and try to make his way into NHL by successfully playing in the AHL league.

6.2 Empirical findings and analysis

The seven interviews that were conducted were successful in providing answers to the research questions of this study. The interviews pointed out how symbolic consumption may take place in video games by means of customization features and offered a lot of information regarding the research questions of this study. The interviews pointed out that players often use the symbolic resources that are available in the game to create a representation of their self into the game world either consciously or unconsciously. In addition players use customization features and the symbolic resources sometimes playfully to create mockeries and caricatures. The findings are presented next in detail as the final part of this chapter. These findings are further discussed in chapter seven with emphasis on the research question.

6.2.1 Customization features are important but not necessary

One of the interests of this study was to determine whether players find customization features important in video games as well as whether they consider such features attractive. All of the participants found customization features interesting and told they considered customization features to add value to the game. However, none of the participants considered customization features to be necessary for the game to be enjoyable. However, two of the seven participants considered that they could pay for additional features such as new equipment or clothing. Timo's comment provides an example of what participants thought about the importance of customization features:

> *I: Okay, so if we move on to customization, how important is it in your opinion that there are customization features in the game?*
>
> T: I think it's like, a very good point or thing that one can build his own character. So in that sense I think it's very good that there are so many options in Skate 2 to customize your character with. So in a sense they are important, but then again it doesn't help if the game is not good. It's like they are an important part but first the game has to be good.

Teemu's comment sheds more light onto how customization features may not be the first thing players do when they get a new game:

> *I: When you started playing Skate 2, what did you think when it started and came to the screen that offered you a possibility to customize your character?*
>
> T: Well at first when I went home with the game it was like "X-X-X-X" to get past it and didn't start playing with the appearance or anything. The only thing I did was to change it into goofy stance, as it was regular at first. So stance was the only thing I changed at first and then later on I customized it more.

An interesting finding was that all three participants who had played both NHL10 and Skate 2 video games considered customization features more important for the skateboarding game than for the ice hockey game. Not only did the players score the importance of customization features in NHL10 lower than Skate 2 when prompted, they also talked a lot less about their NHL10 character. Even when asked to describe their character in the NHL10 in detail, comments were shorter than when discussing Skate 2. Similarly, one of the participants who had played FIFA10, a soccer game similar to NHL10 also found customization features more important for the skateboarding game. Markus commented this issue in the following way:

> Well I'd say that it is more important in games where you are playing in game world that tries to simulate the real world and where you play only with one character – like in Skate 2 or so. That makes it more sensible and interesting to customize when you really see that guy all the time and what he looks like, and you have to do all those things with that guy. But then again in games like NHL or FIFA the guy is wearing the same shirt as others anyways so... Well, maybe you can change the hairstyle so that it shows. So that's why it's not as meaningful in team sports as it is in games where you play with one character.

As Markus' comment points out, the visual prominence of the customizable features is also an issue that can influence how important players consider customization features. Another point that Markus' comment raises is that in the skateboarding game a player controls only one character, whereas in the hockey game the player controls an entire

team of hockey players. In fact, this difference between controlling either one character or an entire team was pointed out by other participants as well. This might make identification with the character easier as Erik's comment suggests.

> *I: So how do you conceive the situation when you're playing, controlling a character or a team? How do you conceive your relationship with that character?*
>
> E: Well in those it's really like I'm skateboarding, I'm snowboarding but in NHL I'm controlling those NHL stars. Like, here comes Ovechkin. But then again, when I play skateboarding or snowboarding i don't think I'm like Rob Dyrdek.

The importance of style and clothing in skateboarding that Timo's comment points out might also partially explain why participants did not discuss their NHL10 character in such detail as their Skate 2 character. Timo commented the role of clothing in skateboarding:

> Me and my friends have talked a lot about skateboarding also on a theoretical level, like what makes skateboarding look good and so on. For example we have, while some might laugh at, considered and speculated it a lot and so on. But anyways I think that skateboarding is all about how it looks. It's about the trick, the skateboarder's style, what that style consists of and in my opinion, whether you want to admit it or not, what that skateboarder looks like. Although it has nothing to do with actually skateboarding, it's still a part of what someone's skateboarding looks like.

Finally, Erik's comment is a great example of why customization features are important to video game players. For him customization features are something to play with and project himself into the game, but he also points out other possible ways of how people might use customization features in video games. He even refers to how his friend uses customization features.

> I really like them. I think the coolest thing is you can make that guy into anything you like and in a way you can make it yourself. Or something else that's cool. Or if my friend makes himself an African man every time, I really don't know what that means.

6.2.2 Character customization as self-representation

Another interest of this study was to examine how players conceive the situation when they are playing and what motivates them to customize their character in the game. Interviews with the participants revealed that customization features are used very often for self-representation, either consciously or unconsciously. Five of the participants were identified to use character customization for self-presentation consciously while two of the participants did not consider their game character to be a representation of themselves.

6.2.2.1 Conscious self-representation through character customization

The first way of customizing the character that was identified – as a means for self-representation – was largely based on participants' favorite brands and their own appearance, including their hairstyle and physique. This aligns with Nelson's (2002) comment as she argued that customization features promote the opportunity to display one's favorite brands.

For players who considered the character as a representation of their self, the game seemed to serve as a resource of similar feelings they get or remember getting from skateboarding or playing hockey. Erik, Otto, Markus, Timo, and Juha all told that they enjoy these games partly due to the similar feelings the game delivers to them. For Timo and Erik the skateboarding game serves as some kind of a substitute for their real hobby when it is not possible. Timo especially emphasized that the skateboarder in the game is a representation of himself.

> *I: What about Skate 2 then, does it have anything to do with your skateboarding hobby? Is it that what makes it interesting or how is it?*
>
> T: Well I don't know, I think it's like I take from that and then reflect it straight into the game so that what I think is cool or stupid in real skateboarding, then it kind of reflects that. So I follow all the same principles and thoughts what I have considering it.

I: So when you're controlling that character in different games, what do you think of that character on the screen? In Skate 2 or in Street Fighter?

T: Yeah, well I've never liked playing with female characters, cause I've always somehow reflected, or tried to consider the character as me in there in a way.

I: Okay, so how about in Skate 2, is it different in it?

T: No, I always dress the character with clothes that I would wear and to some extent I try to do things that I can do in real life. So it's pretty much just like me.

In Timo's playing and use of customization it is easy to notice how the game is a simulation for him and how he is a *realistic* in how he makes his character according to the categorization of Neustaedter and Fedorovskaya (2009). He uses all means to create a reflection of his self-identity into the game. Otto's use of customization features is usually very similar to how Timo uses them:

I: So can you tell me about your character in Skate 2 for example? What does it look like, as accurately as you can what he looks like and what is he wearing?

O: Let me think, he has an ugly mustache, same hairdo as I, but that changes quite often. But then clothes, well some tight jeans and then Nike or Supra sneakers, those are what I usually have noticed to use. And then it varies, some times I use a t-shirt and some times a hoodie.

I: How often do you change your character then?

O: Well, after I had played it through.. Now that I go back to it it's like you skate around at some skatepark then I might change it a bit even every time I play, but back then when I played the campaign I'm not sure if I changed it even once during that.

I: Okay, so did you change it even in the first place?

O: At first, I made it look like me and used clothes I wear myself and then played the campaign through.

I: So you wanted to put yourself in there in a way?

O: Yeah

Otto's interest in clothing which he pointed out during the interview is present here, in that he changes his character's clothing very often in the game based on his gut feeling. Otto's use of customization in NHL10 further demonstrates how he wants to make the character look like himself. However there is also a playful element present as he tells about the mustache:

> *I: Okay, so what about NHL10? How did you make that character, can you remember anything about it?*
>
> O: Well in that also, when I started to play it, what is, is it Be-A-Pro ?
>
> *I: Yep*
>
> O: In Be-A-Pro, well I made it my size and also to look like me also..
>
> *I: Does he have that mustache?*
>
> O: Yeah he has that too
>
> *I: So what is this thing about the mustache, would you like to have a mustache yourself?*
>
> O: It's not even growing, so maybe it's kind of in my hopes… Well to be honest it's more like an inside joke among my friends.

For other interviewees who considered the character as a representation of their self, simulation of the real world with playing was not the objective of playing. Rather their playing was influenced by fantasies, the game providing a possibility to experience another reality or something they know of but cannot execute in the real world (Klug & Schell 2006). For Juha playing Skate 2 is a possibility to experience something he cannot experience in the real world:

> J: I tend to choose clothes that I would buy myself for the character, and those that I would like to buy. So the character evolves in the end into what I am. It is like, if the character has the same kind of style that I have, then it's definitely closer to me than if I would make it look like a joke. So that's me there in the game.
>
> *I: Okay, so do you know what makes you think like that?*

J: I think it is about my own dreams, like you imagine that… …you could do that. And then you want, by means of the game to experience it if you were in that place so that… …for example if you win those races it's like you win them.

Juha's underlying motivations to play were also evident later in the interview:

I: So what do you think about, well have you heard of Skate 3?

J: I've heard it's coming but nothing more

I: Okay, so they are making this feature that there is this hardcore mode, so that it's harder to land the tricks and it jumps less. Is that the right direction?

J: If it stays in certain limits, cause in a way it kills the desire to play if it's too real

I: How does it take it away?

J: In a way playing is about trying to get that feeling you can't get in real life…

Juha's comments are an example of how video games are used to fantasize about doing things not possible for the player in real life (Klug & Schell 2006; Sherry et al. 2006). Here Juha's comment also shows how he uses consumption in the game to create a sense of self-presence. Just like how Belk (1988) argues that our possessions are reflections of our identities, Juha uses in-game products symbolically to place himself in the game.

In addition to Juha, Erik and Otto told that they use brands to create themselves into the game. Here Erik explains how he uses customization features to add to the feeling of being in the game. His second comment also demonstrates how the virtual self is not himself as he views himself now, but rather himself as a professional skateboarder. Molesworth's (2006) notion that players might use video games for consumption daydreams or fantasies is evident here as Erik states he consumes in the game as he would do if he was a professional skateboarder. This skateboarder self is created using consumption symbols that are included in the game as Wattanasuwan and Elliott (1998) argue.

I: So how do you conceive the situation when you're playing, controlling a character or a team? How do you conceive your relationship with that character?

E: Well in those it's really like I'm skateboarding, I'm snowboarding but in NHL I'm controlling those NHL stars. Like, here comes Ovechkin. But then again, when I play skateboarding or snowboarding i don't think I'm like Rob Dyrdek.

I: You told me a little about what can be done with customization, you said that you can be whoever you like. So what kind of things are you thinking of when you start creating your character into the game.

E: I try to make it, well usually, I try to make it pretty much like me physically, and then I dress it so that… with clothes that I would choose if they were free, like I was a sponsored guy and would get a chance to go to a store like Ponke's and pick whatever I want. So in a sense I'm creating myself there. And in NHL it is similar in that if I do, then I'll rather take those I'd use to play if I played.

6.2.2.2 Unconscious self-representation through character customization

While considering the character as some kind of a representation of the self was the most common starting point for the players interviewed for this study, all of them did not consider the character to be themselves. Mika and Teemu both state that they use customization features mainly to create a character that fits the context of the game or something that reflects their ideas of what is aesthetic or stylish. Mika especially emphasizes that he does not want to mix reality with his playing:

I: Okay, so if we move on to customization, you know that Be-A-Pro character, so what is that, can you tell me about it?

M: Well it differs from me, I was a defenseman, he is a forward. It has my name and number but its larger and weighs more than I do

I: Why is that?

M: I think it just more suitable in the game.

I: So that's not like what you would like to be, or what could have happened if you practiced more?

M: No, I think I made it for the fun of it, I don't want to mix reality and games

Conversely Mika at the same time points that he has named his character after himself. Also he uses the same jersey number as he did when he used to play hockey. Furthermore, he comments:

> *I: So, about that NHL10, why do you think you play that particular game?*
>
> M: Well I used to play hockey for quite some time, and it's like very close to me, playing NHL, so it's easy to identify with...

This suggests that although Mika says he does not want to admit it, he likes the game because he can identify with his character carrying his own name aided by his 13 years of experience from playing ice hockey. Teemu's view of his character in the game is somewhat similar with Mika. He first argues that the character has nothing to do with who he is:

> *I: So, have you ever considered what is that character in the game*
>
> T: Well no… I think it just is there and goes… It's just there and then I control it

Yet when the conversation turns to how he has customized his character he tells:

> *I: Well, when did you start to customize that character more or have you even customized it?*
>
> T: Well yeah, I've bought some clothes for it. For the first two days I just played and didn't focus on the character but after that I looked at some boards and switched between them, bought a watch and some jewelry and stuff.
>
> *I: Okay, so can you tell me why did you do that – customized the character? You told me that you switched your character's stance to goofy cause you were a goofy yourself when you used to skate. Is the customization something you just have to do or was there something that got your interest?*
>
> T: Well maybe it was that the clothes were a bit dull at first so I made it look like me when I skated. So like some large bling-bling jewelry, large, baggy pants and so on.

Here it seems that Teemu uses his game-character in a sense to reminisce himself as a skateboarder. This argument is further supported by his earlier comment about why he plays Skate 2. This is very similar to why Erik, Timo and Juha argued to play Skate 2 and NHL10:

> *I: So why is it that when you decide to play a game you choose to play Skate 2?*
>
> T: Well I think that Skate 2 is about… How I used to skate myself and I think I still would if I only had the time and energy... So it's a game about something I'm interested in... So skateboarding is that I'm interested in it and I still kind of would like to... Maybe I'll start again next summer.

6.2.3 Character customization features as a playful element

Finally, the third way of using customization features that was identified was not expected based on the review of literature. The interview pointed out that in addition to using character customization for creating self-representations players also use customization features as a playful element. What is interesting to note here is that both players who told they use customization features playfully – Markus and Otto – pointed out this type of customization to be what they do mainly when playing with friends. However, when they play alone they use customization features most of the time in an entirely different way. Markus' comment is an example how he and his friends have fun with character customization features by making the character look like a joke, but still a great player in terms of the player attributes.

> Well in NHL10 I'd say it belongs to the category of making the character look like a joke, like as fat and short as possible but still as fast as possible, so it's kind of a paradox… And then we laugh at it when we play together.
>
> Many times it's like when our friends come over they are like "hey your guy looks dull" and then we give the controller to someone and the rest go and eat something, and when we come back the guy is surprisingly thirty centimeters shorter and thirty centimeters wider. It's usually so that when you play with friends the guy is made to look like a joke.

It is intriguing to note here how Markus and his friends use the environment of the video game to challenge the realities and limitations of the real world. Thus, the explanation for this type of playful consumption might be that video games are played to explore fantasies (Klug & Schell 2006). Otto's story of how customization is used playfully also supports this notion:

> They are kind of mockeries very often. For example in NHL10 or FIFA we make a hell of a short and fat guy, like someone who in the real world could never be there. And then still it can be there and when you play with it, its attributes get so crazy that it becomes this fat 160 tall guy who is super fast and skillful.

However, using customization features playfully can also be understood simply as having fun based on Markus' notion about laughing at their playfully customized characters. As Raney et al. (2006, 166-167) argue enjoyment and having fun is a motivation in itself for playing video games.

6.2.4 Functional attributes and customization

While the participants primarily considered style and brand to drive their customization decisions, the functional attributes were also pointed out to have relevance in customization when they differ among products. This finding aligns with previous studies (Guo & Barnes 2009; Lehdonvirta 2009) where functional attributes such as better performance and functionality have also been discovered to affect virtual consumption with varying importance to players. However, in this study three of the participants explicitly pointed out that this factor does not automatically govern what they choose. Rather differences in functional attributes define categories of products they choose from. This is evident in Erik's comment for example:

> E: It's maybe like, well it definitely matters if it's that snowboard for example. Let's imagine I have two snowboards here. One is better, I can spin around one revolution more but it's not as cool as the other one that's my dream board, the I take the one out of those two. There are still a few of those better boards and I've always found one that satisfies me enough.

I: Okay, right…

E: So in that sense I choose performance

I: So it matters that you can be good in the game?

E: Yeah, and particularly that, even though I play by myself, I still like to be able to make better tricks, and through that get better feelings than I would get from having the coolest board in there.

Furthermore, the functional attributes are not so significant to all players as Juha's comment points out. For Juha, a sense of self-presence that he gets through customization is more important than the functionality of his skateboard in the game that might help his progress.

J: And then, the skateboard is the same one that I have, or had actually. A black GIRL skateboard with the logo, and then same set-up as I have, so the trucks are quite stiff.

I: Okay, you told that the trucks are same as you have in your own skateboard. So if the stiff trucks make it harder to play, is it more important for you to have similar trucks in the game as in the real world so that the guy is like you, or to make the character as good as possible?

J: That the character is me

I: Okay, so it doesn't matter if it makes it harder?

J: No, because then you kind of get closer to your own skateboarding so you can imagine being in the game.

6.2.5 Thoughts on brand placement in customization features

One topic of discussion in the interviews was whether the participants liked the idea of real brands in video games as brand placements. Two separate findings emerged: first, participants considered brand placements to add realism and authenticity to the virtual world. Second, character customization was linked by one player to exploring new styles,and by two players to their purchase decisions.

6.2.5.1 Brand placements add to realism of the game

Many in-game advertising studies have discovered that brand placement in video games are often considered to add to the realism of the game, and players generally are positive about brand placements in video games (ie. Nelson 2002; Molesworth 2006). This is also the conclusion of this study as many of the players readily commented on how display of real and fitting brands in video games creates realism. Timo's comment is an example of how players commented on brands in Skate 2.

> I think they bring some kind of, kind of realism to an extent. Like, they are present everywhere, like in real skateboarding world, as it is so commercial and branded. And like professional skateboarding and skateboarding media, so that if you follow that you could easily get sucked into it. Or like, it all revolves around brands.

Erik's comment about brand placements in NHL10 points out how they are involved in creating an authentic experience. Similar comments about brand placements in FIFA10 soccer game were also witnessed. Erik commented:

> I think they add realism. Just like in NHL there are sideboard adverts and others and they are a big part of it, or not necessarily a big part but still they belong in there, and that's why they need to be there in the game as well. If they weren't, it'd lack something, and take away from the feeling. Just like if there is no realistic commentary or announcements. They are a part of that as well. And that they are real adverts, or what you would expect to see in on the sideboards versus them being some fictional ones. If they were fictional then it takes away, or at for me it takes away from it.

Erik's comment is an example of how real brands play an important role in constructing the reality of the virtual environment. As such it serves as an example of how consumers can sense that a virtual reality is incomplete if the world does not have the indexes and symbols consumers are accustomed to (Pennington 2001).

6.2.5.2 Role of brand placements in customization features

As participants comments regarding self-representation in video games have already shown, brands have an important role in the use of character customization features in video games, especially when players aim for self-representation. For many of the participants brands were the resource to build a realistic or fantasy-driven self-representation into the video game. For example one participant told how he always uses his two favorite shoe brands in the game and how he likes to use Zero and Anti-Hero clothes in the game cause he likes these brands. Also, in total four of the participants explicitly referred to brands they used when they told about their use of customization features and all but one considered real brands to add to the interest of customization features. Only one of the participants considered brands unimportant, pointing out that the products only need to look like they fit the context.

The interviews also revealed how video game players use customization features not only for self-representation in the video game and to fool around, but also to try out new styles when it is possible. Juha who had played Skate 2 told how he uses customization features sometimes to browse for new styles when he is tired of playing:

> It's interesting in a way, that you can find new things from there. So it's not just about playing. Especially when you're bored with just playing the game so you don't want to play those same things over and over again. It is nice that you can customize it and kind of try new things, different styles.

This type of use of customization features aligns with the findings of Messinger et al. (2009) who argue that virtual consumption experiences may affect real life consumer behavior. In their study of the Second Life virtual world, Messinger et al. (ibid) discovered that positive virtual consumption experiences make people more likely to buy the brand in the real world. Indeed, two of the participants – Juha and Roope – reported that they had bought something that they had first seen in Skate 2's virtual shop. Juha told about how he bought a shirt based on his in-game experience:

> *I: Have you ever bought something based on what you have seen in the game, or have you found anything cool from there?*

> J: Well those products are rarely sold in Finland, but I bought this one shirt from the United States when I was there because I had seen it in the game…

However, participants also pointed out that the brand placements do not deliver as much as they could, because the collections are often not available in Finland as it is evident in Juha's comment, or because they are already old when the game comes out. While Timo's comment demonstrates the latter reason, it is his idea that makes his comment especially interesting from a marketer's point of view:

> *I: Could it work so, or do you think it is so that if you see something cool in the game or make your character look cool, you then would go and try that same thing in the real life?*
>
> T: Hmm, I maybe not to that extent... But that's, or like those clothes are available in real life, but.. It maybe should be more like that you launch an upcoming collection in the virtual world or in the game, and only after that in the real world. So that's an interesting thought, how it might work, as it's now so that it is old stuff in the game.

Indeed, a video game might be a potential medium to launch new collections as Timo suggests. The purchases of Juha and Roope, which they told to be based on what they had seen in the game, are a good example why the products that are in the game should also be available in real life.

7 DISCUSSION

Now that the findings of the empirical research have been presented it is time to assess the research question of this study: *How video game players symbolically consume through character customization?* Based on the interviews this research identifies two themes that can be used to describe symbolic consumption through character customization in video games. First, players use symbolic consumption to create self-representations into the game world. This type of consumption is here referred to as *self-representative consumption.* When consumption is self-representative, players use customization features and symbolic resources that are available to create their self into the video game. This self can be an accurate reflection of their self-image, but it can also be based on players' hopes and dreams. The second theme, *playful consumption* refers to the use of customization features not for self-representation, but for enjoyment and fun. This playful consumption draws often from commonly shared understandings and realities about the context the game depicts in order to create caricatures and mockeries. These two themes are next discussed in more detail.

7.1 Self-representative consumption

The first theme this study recognizes is *self-representative consumption* that refers to use of character customization to create a self-representation into the virtual world of a video game. This self-representation may draw extensively from the player's self-image, but it can also be based on who the player aspires to be or how the player wants to imagine himself. Players may also utilize consumption to experience the past again and reminisce themselves in a certain role using the video game.

While customization features include adjustments of the character's physique to make the character resemble the player to an extent, major part of self-representation depends on brands that are included in the game. For the players who consider their virtual character to be their current self in the virtual world, real brands serve as resources to strengthen their sense of presence in the world of a video game. These players use their favorite brands and – when possible – clothes they possess in real life, to dress their

character. Thus, this character in the game expresses their self-image by means of in-game consumption the character customization features enable.

While the consumption is still based on favorite brands and the player's idea of what is cool when the character is considered more as a representation of what the player has been in the past or how he wants to imagine himself, its meaning changes. Whereas the style and brands used by players who consider their character to be their current self reflects their current favorite brands and style, this might not be the case when the character is a representation of who the player has been or who he would like to be in the context of the game. In this case players brand and style choices in the game might actually reflect what they would buy if they were in that position or what they bought back when they were in the position or role the game allows them to experience. The video game self may be a situational self, where consumption is used to feel better equipped to fulfill a certain role (Piacentini & Mailer 2004).

Self-representative consumption that this study recognizes to take place in video games is a fine example of how the symbolic nature of consumption that is widely recognized in real life (e.g. Belk 1988, Elliott & Wattanasuwan 1998) also guides consumption in video games, even when playing alone with no one else around to see one's character. Considering the argument of Schau and Gilly (2003) that in virtual environments users mainly experience the symbolic value of the product, this result was expected. In video games players really seem to follow Belk's (1988) suggestion "we are what we have" as self is primarily expressed through virtual possessions. However, it should be noted that in video games virtual possessions are also the easiest way of self-representation.

Self-representative consumption is also used for exploring consumer daydreams as Molesworth (2006) suggests as well and some times even for product trial. The interviews showed that players use character customization features also to explore new styles and sometimes even as a supporting tool for their clothing buying decisions. All in all, the ways players told they use character customization for self-representation supports Molesworth's (ibid) notion that not only can games can allow individuals to ask themselves

about who they are, but also they can encourage change by allowing a reflection on these choices. It seems that the construction of the self can draw from video games.

Finally, the comments from participants also verify Biocca's (1997) suggestion that close mapping of a user's body to a virtual body evokes a mental model of self within the virtual environment. However, the findings of this study suggest that close mapping of a user's possessions or desired possessions also play a role in evoking a mental model of self within the virtual environment. As Biocca (ibid) argues, this mental model of the self may influence mental representation of the players's body and his identity. It seems that self-representative consumption in a video game may serve in the construction of the self as consumption in real-life does.

7.2 Playful consumption

The second theme this study recognizes in symbolic consumption through character customization features is *playful consumption*. When players use customization features playfully, they use symbolic resources that are available for them for example to create caricatures and mockeries of real life characters. Examples of this type of behavior the participants provided included a cowboy skateboarder and an obese 160cm tall hockey player.

While the review of literature that was conducted for this study did not suggest behavior that is here identified as playful consumption, it can be understood based on the theory of what motivates people to play video games. Exploring fantasies is one known source of motivation to play video games (Sherry et al. 2006). The reality a video game produces may enable players to do things that are not necessarily possible or likely in the real world such as an obese 160 cm tall hockey player playing in NHL.

Another possible explanation for playful consumption lies in the categorization Lehdonvirta (2009) presents, as he argues hedonic attributes drive the use of virtual goods. The comments from players suggest that they may create caricaturical characters just because they find them in some way aesthetically compelling. From this point of view,

view, the underlying motivation for playful consumption may simply be the enjoyment of playing video games that Raney et al. (2006) point out.

8 CONCLUSIONS

As the final chapter of this study, this chapter presents the conclusions of this study regarding its theoretical and managerial implications. Suggestions for further research are also presented.

8.1 Theoretical implications

This study has contributed to the study of consumer research by studying symbolic consumption that takes place in video games. The results suggest that symbolic consumption serves as a resource for players to sense presence in the video game, as players use marketplace symbols to place themselves into the game. At the same time symbolic consumption in video games allows players to consider who they are. This supports the view of Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould & Thompson 2005) that the marketplace is a preeminent source of mythic and symbolic resources through which people construct narratives of identity and verifies the notion of Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998) that mediated experiences can serve in the construction of the self. Marketplace symbols are also used by video game players to create characters they find appealing or fun in some way. These findings are of relevance also to research on virtual consumption as they demonstrate the role of consumption symbolism in virtual environments.

In addition, this study has shed more light on customization features that Nelson (2002) suggested to possibly provide for greater brand involvement. This study has continued from there by studying how video game players use character customization features when they are implemented with real brands.

8.2 Managerial implications

The managerial implications of this study relate to the field of in-game advertising. This study has shed light on how video game players use customization features and how important real brands that suit the context are for players' self-representation. Based on

these findings game developers should strive to get brands that suit the game context included in the game in order to provide players a gaming experience that is realistic.

From an advertiser's point of view, this study has pointed out how brands should be interested to get their products included into video games where players expect them to be. Earlier studies have shown that in-game advertising can strengthen brand awareness (e.g. Nelson 2002, Lee & Faber 2007) and shift brand attitudes (Mackay et al. 2009). Based on this study, players appreciate brand placement into character customization and they often use brands to create self-representations into the game. Brand placement into character customization offers another possibility to get in contact with existing and potential customers of the brand.

8.3 Limitations

In this study character customization has been studied from the perspective of symbolic consumption. The research was conducted by focusing on the use of character customization in two games, Skate 2 (Electronic Arts 2009a) and NHL10 (Electronic Arts 2009b) interviewing seven Finnish video game players. As such, this study does not offer a general view on what drives character customization in video games. Rather, it presents a view on how symbolic consumption may take place in the context of a video game. The context of this study should also be considered when considering the transferability of the results to other contexts.

8.4 Suggestions for further research

So far, studies of consumption in virtual worlds has focused either on consumption inside socially oriented virtual worlds or game-oriented virtual worlds. While these studies have identified functional attributes and consumption symbolism to both have an influence on consumption, the relative importance of these two drivers has not been studied. To better understand the phenomenon of virtual consumption it would be beneficial to study consumption comparing its drivers in different types of virtual worlds. The categorization of virtual worlds that divides them into dynamic social worlds, static

social worlds, dynamic game worlds and static game worlds, (Tikkanen et al. 2009) could serve as a starting point for this type of study. Another area of interest based on this study would be to study self-representative consumption in video games further, with focus on understanding the underlying structures and motivations that lead to different types of self-representations.

Regarding the study of in-game advertising, this study has demonstrated how players enjoy using real brands in character customization to create self-representations into video games. However, the efficiency of this advertising method is still unknown. For in-game advertising, it would be beneficial to study the effects of brand placements as character customization by for example comparing brand recall of brands placements in the game environment to recall of brands player uses on his character.

Finally, studying consumption in other game-oriented virtual worlds is also an interesting topic for further research, as it would shed more light on the meaning of the context of the game on in-game consumption behavior.

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10 APPENDICES

APPENDIX A – Interview form

- **Background information**
    - Age, sex
    - Playing habits (how much, alone/together with friends)
    - Involvement in similar activities the game creates (Y/N)
    - What games are played?

- **Playing experience**
    - Why do you play video games / a particular game
        - Just fun or is it about accomplishing something?
        - Related to hobbies?
        - Fantasies, daydreams?
        - Social aspect of gaming
    - Tell me about the relationship between you and the character on the screen
        - Are you in the game or are you just controlling a character in the game?
        - In your opinion what creates that feeling
        - Is it different with other games

- **Using customization features**
    - Do you find the customization features built into the game interesting and why?
        - What is it that you like about them?
            - Ability to create yourself into the game?
            - Nice to build and play with stuff
            - It's a part of the game?
        - Would you be willing to pay for added features?
        - Why don't you like them?
    - What is your goal when you customize your character?
        - Make it like me
        - Trying something new
        - Being someone else
    - Tell me about how you customize your character: What kind of issues do you take into consideration?
        - Brand
        - Aesthetics
        - Online / Offline
        - In-game cost
        - Abilities of the equipment/clothing etc.
    - Can you describe your own character from the games you play

- When you play online do you look at what other players do / wear ?
    - Does it matter to you?

- **In-game experiences & real life**
    - What do you think of the fact that there are real brands built into video games?
        - Do you consider them as advertising / increasing realism?
        - How do you feel about that in general?
    - You told me that you choose certain brands/style in the game, is that something you are interested in wearing/doing in real life
    - Does experiencing a product or a brand in a game affect your attitude towards that brand or product and if so, how?
    - If you see something interesting in the game would you consider buying that for yourself in real life?