Article

CONVERGENCE

Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies
1–25
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DOI: 10.1177/1354856516686481
journals.sagepub.com/home/con

We beat the cops in GTA: Po(ludic)al activism in the age of video games

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Abstract
This article explores how individuals reflect on their digital experiences of actualizing fantasies to make sense of their everyday actions, particularly in the context of video gaming. Our study takes a qualitative approach to understanding the context of materializing consumer fantasies, as initially experienced and actualized in video games, and how these fantasies are transformed into material reality, through an investigation of an illustrative case of mass street protests, the 2013 Gezi Protests in Turkey. The findings suggest that digital virtual experiences in video games have obvious manifestations in the material world, as consumers travel on the borders of reality, moving back and forth into the liminoid terrain of the digital virtual, and provide a deeper understanding of how the blurred boundaries between the virtual and material are established in practice.

Keywords
Digital virtual consumption, Gezi Protests, liminoid, political activism, social movements, video games

Introduction

While the exponential growth in the video games industry proportionally contributed to an interest in game studies in recent decades (e.g. Castronova, 2005; Juul, 2005; Salen and Zimmerman, 2003; Sutton-Smith, 1997), the modern study of play and games can be traced back to the early 20th century. Particularly following Huizinga's seminal work, *Homo Ludens* (1938), there have been notable attempts to theorize play and its centrality to human culture and modern social life.

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Acknowledging play as a salient aspect of human experience inevitably led to integration between ludic studies and many other genres of cultural and social studies, such as politics, media studies, semiology, anthropology and psychology (see e.g. Spanier, 1972; Malaby, 2009; Simons, 2007; Kücklich and Fellow, 2004; Fleer, 2010 for a review in respective domains). Moreover, the commercial success of video games also triggered a significant amount of research focusing on the role of play in consumer behaviour, blending experiential aspects of gaming with the vast scholarly domain of consumer theory (e.g. Holbrook et al., 1984). In this context, a contemporary review of such domains and experiences through both analogue and digital glasses of gameplay offers alternative conceptualizations of identity formation with regard to an individual's relationship with the virtual and material realities (Belk, 2013).

In broader terms, this article attempts to explore how video-game players make sense of their everyday actions as drawn from their gaming experiences and the extent to which they reflect on these experiences in actualizing fantasies, mainly related to consumption, in real-life contexts. Taking a closer look at this issue, it also intends to contribute to emerging literature which relates to the understanding how various forms and degrees of virtualization are inscribed into daily life (Boellstorff, 2008; Kendall, 2002; Kirkpatrick, 2013). To this end, the article addresses the following questions: How do commercial video-game players reflect on their experiences to make sense of their everyday actions? How do these reflections relate to materialization of consumer fantasies, as initially experienced in video games? How does such an actualization of a digital virtual script foster a better understanding of the self and environment in different contexts? While it is possible to approach these questions from a number of different perspectives, we chose to read them through the lens of political activism, using a qualitative inquiry based on gamers' reported experiences during the 2013 Gezi Protests.

The choice of a street protest as the background in seeking to understand how players make sense of their everyday experiences in the context of video games serves the objectives of this article in several ways. First, these protests act as a break with ordinary life, which is subjugated by dominant system paradigms, and therefore stimulate deeper discussion and understandings of the contextualization and actualization of video-game players' digital virtual experiences. The article conceptualizes this breach between virtual and real-life by combining theories of play with those of performance, as well as building on contemporary arguments around virtuality in order to develop a better understanding of how the blurred boundaries between the virtual and material are established in practice. Along with this fundamental contribution to the theory of play and games, the article delves deep into the *digital virtual*, in which the players are provided with a renewed understanding of their identities in economic and political contexts. Potential transformations in this new domain, which are enhanced through players' transgression across the boundaries of material and virtual realities, clearly have the capability to extend the frontiers of research in postmodern politics and consumption.

The article is organized as follows: The next section opens with a brief narrative outline of the Gezi Protests, which serves to illustrate our research setting. We then review theories of play, giving particular attention to the binarism of the virtual and the real, and augment our discussion of the blurred intersection of the digital virtual, as we explore possible transformations of the identities of individuals as gamer, consumer and protester as they transgress the boundaries. To this end, our literature review provides a brief overview of consumer fantasizing and the actualization of these fantasies through digital virtual consumption (DVC). This discussion also draws on relevant studies pertaining to the role of play in political participation. Subsequent sections present our research methodology and findings, built on the rich narratives reflecting the participants'

unique experiences. In our conclusion, we discuss the theoretical and practical implications of the findings, limitations and future research frontiers.

Background

> When a small group of activists gathered at Istanbul's Gezi Park in late May2013, no one imagined that this would ignite the biggest civil protest movement that Turkey has witnessed in its 90-year history. The purpose of the environmentalist group was to demonstrate against an urban redevelopment plan launched by the government, which included the demolition of the park in order to recreate the Ottoman military barracks that had stood in the same place nearly a century earlier, but which would house residences and a shopping mall. For the demonstrators, the uprooting of the trees not only signified the destruction of one of the few public green spaces which were essential for the city to breathe, but also the increasing authoritarianism of the ruling party, which had long ignored the voice of the public, as well as the cultural and historic heritage of the city.
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> What started as a peaceful sit-in at the park mushroomed into huge nation-wide protests, following the brutal police crackdown on activists at dawn on 31 May. Police violence, accompanied by the extensive use of tear gas, water cannons, and plastic bullets, together with the detention of hundreds of protesters, served to outrage many, mostly young and otherwise political, Turkish citizens, with an estimated 2.5 million people involved in street rallies across the country at the height of the events. Occasional clashes with the riot police, even in isolated streets, were met with mass protests by local residents, banging pots and pans from their balconies. Millions of messages on social media expressed solidarity with the protesters, posted in response to messages, videos, and images uploaded from the clash sites. The videos and images showed barricades, gas canisters, numerous fires burning, the wounded and their wounds, instances of wit and humour, areas occupied by the protesters, maps and atlases, tents and flags, singing and chanting, graffiti on walls – in other words, all the tangible and intangible artefacts of the *battlefield*.
>
> The government response to the Gezi Protests was authoritarian, refusing to cancel the redevelopment plans, and dismissing the protesters as a 'bunch of extremists' and 'looters'. The reaction of governmental bodies, led by the Prime Minister, was to advance the idea of a foreign plot supported by the opposition inside the country and abroad, and conceptualise the protests as part of 'a game being played using Gezi Park as an excuse' (Aljazeera English, 2013). Government-organized rallies opposing the Gezi Protests were also billed in this way: 'Let's spoil the big game and make history'. However, the government and its supporters were not the only ones who nurtured this meaning-making process which identified participants in events through their roles in a game. From the very early days of the protests, the protesters articulated analogous perceptions of themselves and their environment in both the real and virtual battlefields of resistance, as manifested by the widely employed graffiti that rapidly became the mark of Gezi solidarity: 'You have messed with the generation who beat the cops in GTA'[1].

This account of the Gezi Protests briefly summarizes the sequence of events, as described in news reports, still photographs, and other images from news sources and social media platforms, as well as the authors' personal observations and experiences. Play and games were common themes running through all facets of the Gezi events, were evident in references to urban spaces, newspaper headlines, as well as popular social media hashtags, and were occasionally of a humorous tone (Colak, 2014). During modern Turkey's politically hottest summer, the asphalted area leading to Istanbul's Taksim Square – the main gathering point for the Gezi Park protesters – had been spray painted with the slogan 'Call of Duty Taksim', while Chuck the Yellow Bird starred in

memes wearing a gas mask, and star shapes were painted on walls accompanied by a warning for the riot police: ‘Now it’s six stars and the tanks will spawn’. This new language of resistance (Öğün-Emre et al., 2013), in which ‘play’ implied fun or conspiracy, was evidently based on a ubiquitous understanding of the game-like qualities of the unrest. This, remarkably, was not unique to Gezi; a quick scan through photographs of demonstrations from Tahrir Square to Hong Kong revealed that similar reflections upon video gaming experiences were common place during social upheavals worldwide. However, despite the existence of research which documents the use of traditional forms of popular culture and their role in developing protest cultures (see Reed, 2005 for a review and history), studies focusing on video games and gaming experiences as an alternative resource for this new language of resistance are literally non-existent.

In order to conceptualize how video games can mobilize civic participation, a broader understanding of how play is central to politics is essential. In this context, below we provide a review of the literature beginning with the theory of play, extending to discussions of the virtual-real dichotomy, explaining how gamer, consumer and protester identities are configured and transformed as individuals move across the blurred boundaries of reality. To better understand the context of these possible transformations, the review provides a brief insight into consumer fantasizing and the potential of the digital virtual for alternative conceptualizations of consumption. The review then focuses on the relationship between play and political activism, first by examining the role of play in social movements and then by exploring play and protest as experiences of the liminoid. This final section concludes by reviewing the embodiment of play in the formation of new protest cultures, in which video games might be embedded to generate a new source for meaning-making of the self and the environment.

Play is definitely political, yet the centrality of play to human existence is not confined to politics. Johan Huizinga, who was among the first modern theorists of play, argued that play did not only precede culture, but it also embodied the essence of culture, and suggested that elements of play were present in all aspects of civilization, such as war, religion, language, politics, sports and the arts. Based on the premise that play is a ubiquitous theme of life, Huizinga offered an elaborate definition of the concept in his much celebrated *Homo Ludens* (1938). He described play as a pleasurable activity that exists only for its own sake (in contrast to former utilitarian definitions), separable from everyday experience (taking place in a *magic circle* with defined boundaries), and is safe (unproductive). The core ideas of Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* deeply influenced later scholars of play, such as Caillois (1958), Juul (2005) and Sutton-Smith (1997). In this domain of research, most scholarly debate evolved around the concept of a magic circle. It is important to review this concept for two reasons. First, it stands as the source of several dichotomies (and problematics) in game studies, such as real versus virtual, serious versus non-serious and utilitarian versus gratuitous. Second, the concept is essential to an understanding of the design and production of digital video games. In this context, an appraisal of the magic circle is also crucial to the current investigation into the ways in which experiences in virtual game worlds are reflected in the material real.

Playful boundaries of reality

The concept of a magic circle was introduced by Huizinga (1938), who believed that each playground was an isolated place with its own special rules, which players were obliged to follow. In the magic circle, the normal rules of meaning and behaviour are suspended (Moore, 2011), separating the play-space from the real world, both ontologically and ethically (Page, 2012).

	Real (*existing*)	*Possible* (*not existing*)
Ideal	virtual (ideally real)	abstract (possibly ideal)
Actual	concrete present (actually real, material)	probable (actual possibility)

Figure 1. Ontological tetrology based on Shields (2003).

Within the magic circle, different rules of morality apply, allowing and even encouraging abusive or violent behaviour (Huizinga, 1938). Acting as a spatial, temporal or psychological boundary between the normality of everyday and the enchanted domain of play, the magic circle is also capable of generating a myriad of emotions. These range from positive states of pleasure and happiness, to highly negative moods, such as anger and frustration (Malaby, 2007). Moreover, the players within the magic circle experience a partial or complete suspension of disbelief (Coleridge, 1817), increasing their *immersion*, which may be defined as a state of being completely absorbed in the game, and the players' consequent identification with its constituents, oblivious to the realities of everyday life (Coomans and Timmermans, 1997).

Setting play apart from ordinary life leads to a traditional understanding of games as activities that take place away from 'what matters, [and] where "real" things happen' (Malaby, 2007: 97). Therefore, the magic circle gives rise to a fundamental problematic in game studies, the dichotomy of the virtual and the real: play and games are traditionally considered to reside in the former, and serious, productive work in the latter. This framework is highly attributable to the Protestant ethics of work and seriousness (Dibbell, 2005), which contrasts the real to the virtual, including all its annexes: the imaginary, the fictional and the (computer) mediated (Calleja, 2010). In this traditional view, the real is used to denote the material, or the concrete, as opposed to virtual, which pertains to the imaginary, or the abstract, suggesting that these two domains are mutually exclusive (Jackson, 1981). Although there has been recent critical scrutiny related to the conceptualization of the virtual as strictly disconnected from the real, this binary relationship remains a major theme in the study of digital games (Malaby, 2007). An examination of the literature reveals that scholarly discourse in this domain may be viewed as a continuum between two extremes: those who attempt to entirely separate the two and those who envision the ultimate form of reality as being either material (e.g. Lehdonvirta, 2010) or virtual (e.g. Boellstorff, 2008; Castronova, 2007). Researchers with less extreme views focus on improving the definition of 'real', while acknowledging the fragile boundaries existing between relevant concepts such as ideal, virtual and material. In this context, elaborating on the Deleuzian theories of the virtual, Shields (2003) offers an ontological tetrology, which encompasses the unstable relationality of these constructs (see Figure 1).

Rather than expressing the virtual as a cancellation of the real, or seeing the virtual as existing parallel to, but separately from, the material space (as manifested in movies such as *The Matrix*), Shields (2003) reformulates the relationship between material and virtual realities, addressing the ideal (intangible) and the actual (tangible) circumstances in which these realities can take place (exist), as opposed to the possible (does not exist). According to Shields (2003), things that exist can either be virtual or actual, but in general terms, both are real. For example, our memories or intentions are real but intangible, placing them in the virtual. On the other hand, things that do not exist can be either abstract, like concepts or miracles, or probable, like predictions, which are only

understandable mathematically. Moreover, as Baudrillard (1984) notes, the possibilities brought by new media have increasingly obscured the delineations of these realms, blurring boundaries and engendering hybridized experiences (Jordan, 2009). Video games, as unmarred examples of new media, are probably the most significant instance of this phenomenon, allowing new opportunities to transgress the boundaries of realities and move back and forth over the magic circle.

In addition, the literature on video games acknowledges the barriers of the magic circle as being ‘fuzzy and permeable’ and that the pleasure associated with play is in fact derived from the act of crossing these barriers (Salen and Zimmerman, 2003: 94). According to Bogost (2008: 134), ‘the magic circle of the game world ruptures into the material world’, which equates with Castronova’s (2005: 147) definition of a ‘porous membrane’, rather than a solid one. This porousness allows the players to step in and out of the circle, bringing their real-life experiences and personal histories to the game (Calleja, 2010). Consequently, according to Nieuwdorp (2005: 6), the game is an ‘organic entity which changes, develops and interacts with its surroundings’, and this blending pervades every aspect of human life. This two-way traffic between the virtual and real has inevitably created academic interest in the types of in-game behaviour that can be transferred beyond the game, and vice versa, which was recently highlighted in research focusing on the inscription of virtualization into daily life (e.g. Belk, 2013; Nardi, 2010; Pearce et al., 2011).

Identities in transformation: Players as consumers and protesters

Castronova (2005) asserts that players of video games inevitably transfer their behavioural assumptions and attitudes beyond the magic circle, which results in an enmeshed valuation of things inside and outside cyberspace. In this context, three particular domains of life that reflect such interweaving are markets, politics and law, which are often instrumentalized by players to serve their constant transformation of identities. According to the Castronova,

> [t]hese avenues . . . are responsible for putting the synthetic world inside an almost-magic circle rather than a truly magic one, and the consequence seems to be that those who travel back and forth seem to gradually stop reminding themselves that the events in the synthetic world are supposed to be some kind of fantasy. (p. 161)

The following chapter of his *Synthetic Worlds* is entirely devoted to exploring specific instances in each of these domains, in which the discussion is mainly grounded in the current tendency for institutions outside the membrane to formally validate these contexts within. It is clearly appropriate, therefore, to explore the blending of these domains from multiple perspectives. In this context, we focus below on markets and politics, in order to provide a better understanding of players as consumers and protesters, as they strive to actualize their fantasies for an imagined future self, moving across the blurred boundaries in these two particular domains.

The study of the economics of video games was long confined to an analysis of the consumption of the technologies and related devices (Lehdonvirta, 2012). A perspective shift occurred when Castronova (2001) and Dibbell (2005) charted how the exchange of virtual property and labour for real money enabled virtual economies to became a concrete reality. The emergence of *gold farms*, which employed real players in production of virtual artefacts, or enabled them to earn virtual gold, shifted academic interest towards this new frontier of hyperreality, focusing mainly on the production and consumption of virtual items in exchange for material dollars. Later, in a series of papers, Molesworth and Denegri-Knott (2007) developed the concept of DVC, acknowledging that

consumption is not a simple act of exchange, but rather a process of actualizing consumer imagination. In this context, Denegri-Knott and Molesworth (2010) suggest that the attractiveness of video games stems from their capacity to provide consumers with opportunities to stimulate desires and actualize daydreams and fantasies, as they offer a safe playground for experimentation through the utilization of digital virtual objects. The authors elaborate by proposing a theorization on the transfers between the real and the virtual, and the means by which these blurred boundaries may enhance identity formation and transformation.

Drawing on Shields' (2003) theorization, Molesworth and Denegri-Knott (2007) propose that consumer fantasies are normally placed in the abstract, as, in essence, they are ideally possible. Fantasies, such as owning a magic sword or being a champion racer, can then be imagined in the virtual (for instance, through readings in the fantasy-genre), but cannot (or are extremely unlikely to) be actualized in material reality. However, the digital revolution provides consumers with new frontiers for actualizing such fantasies in this new space, which Shields (2003) labels as the digital virtual. Moreover, because consumption is directly related to identity formation and transformation, it is clearly possible to extend these activities from states of *having* into states of *being*. In this context, DVC not only allows the ownership of a magical staff but also provides the opportunity to be a wizard; not only fulfils the desire for an exotic car but also brings the sense of being a champion racer; and not only enables one to drive a military-tank but also presents the opportunity to become an outlaw.

The capability of video games to generate imagined future selves (Gee, 2003) also appears to be a central issue in political manifestations of the obscured distinction between the real and the virtual. The incursion of video games into the political sphere is inevitable, due to the inherently political nature of games, which are

> rule-based formal system[s] with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are optional and negotiable (Juul, 2003: 35).

Widespread commercial success has been seen for titles recreating specific political events (e.g. *Medal of Honor*, Electronic Arts, 2010), an urban planning context (e.g. *SimCity*, Maxis, 1989), or an historical era (e.g. *Pharaoh*, Sierra Entertainment, 1999). Such success has stimulated further discussion on the role of video games in enhancing identity formations, in which players step into and out of the digital virtual, for example, to take control of an AH-64D Apache helicopter in the ongoing war in Afghanistan, to act as the mayor of a large city or to even reign over ancient Egypt. In an effort to underline the persuasive potential of video games, Bogost (2006: 1) states that

> [p]laying such games can have a political impact because they allow players to embody political positions and engage in political actions many will never have previously experienced, and because they make it possible for players to deepen their understanding of the multiple causal forces that affect any given, always unique, set of historical circumstances.

Moreover, video games have the capacity to open up a political space, even if only by portraying 'contemporary political realities in relatively unmediated form' (Galloway, 2006: 92), such as the banality of modern life as presented in *The Sims,* 'in which commodity consumption is the raison d'être' (Kline et al., 2003: 276; Maxis, 2000). By allowing the players to engage with representations of political realities, video games enable individuals to establish meaningful links to the sociocultural context in which they live.

The role of play in protest

In order to better contextualize how gaming experiences link to the formation of protester identities, as well as a new language of resistance, a closer look into the relationships between play and protest is essential. To this end, we trace the roots of play in political activism in this section, first by examining the role of play and games as particular forms of popular culture in social movements and then by exploring play and protest as experiences of the liminoid.

The literature on the use of play in social movements began to emerge recently, particularly through the work of activists (Jordan, 1998; Shepard, 2009). However, its theoretical and spiritual roots can be traced to earlier schools of thought, including the Frankfurt School (e.g. Marcuse, 1972), and situationism in the 1960s. The ideas and tactics offered by these schools are the bases for a stream of research focusing on the uses of popular culture within protest, which is a suitable context to explore the use of play and games.

The relationship between politics and popular culture has a long history, stretching as far back as the writings of Plato. However, scholarly consideration of the growing use of popular culture to promote political interests is relatively new, and regarding it as evidence of a new political culture is even more recent (Clark and Hoffmann-Martinot, 1998; Scott and Street, 2000). In this vein, the relationship between popular culture and politics can be analysed from two perspectives: the first is the politicization of popular culture, in which the state imposes its interests and values on popular culture; and the second, the use of various forms of popular culture by oppressed social groups to express grievances and resistance, as well as a means of creating solidarity, attaining mass visibility, and attracting non-affiliated groups into the particular political discourse (Scott and Street, 2000). Given the scope of this article, we have focused on the latter.

Social movement studies in past decades revealed a significant change in the characteristics of these movements in favour of culturally defined solidarity structures, as opposed to traditional forms of solidarity through political parties, labour unions or associations (Melucci, 1996; Touraine, 1985). According to Touraine (1985: 774), this shift from a sociopolitical form of collective action to a sociocultural form is realized through 'the production of symbolic goods, that is, of information and images, of culture itself'. In this context, popular culture and its participatory practices not only act as fertile spaces for developing civic skills, but they may also be utilized to support and nurture grassroots activism (Brough and Shesthrova, 2011; Jenkins, 2006).

Since the1950s, a variety of forms of popular culture have been effectively incorporated into protest movements in order to attract attention and increase visibility, enhance collective identity and influence public opinion. These include music, film and video, street drama, literature and the visual arts such as paintings, murals and graffiti (Eyerman and Jamison, 1998; Moser, 2003; Reed, 2005). In parallel, literature on popular culture engagement in protest has blossomed, nourished in part by Bakhtin's *carnivalesque*, which is essential to an understanding of the relationship between protest and play in general, and video games in particular.

The glorification of play in political activism was mostly derived from the writings of the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, who articulated the carnivalesque as a potent tool to transform social consciousness. As many authors argue, contemporary street protests essentially capture the spirit of Bakhtin's (1984) carnivalesque, which refers to a liminoid mode that liberates the participant through humour and chaos. This is achieved by subverting the assumptions of the dominant style or atmosphere. According to Bakhtin (1984), the carnivalesque is rooted in the carnival, an alternative social space which is to be lived in rather than

observed. It is a ‘special condition’, or a ‘second life’, which allows exemption from certain societal rules and restrictions (p. 7–8).

Bakhtin distinguishes four categories of the carnivalesque. These may be summarized as *familiar and free interaction between people*, in which differences and hierarchies are abandoned; *acceptance of eccentric behaviour*, where expectations of the normal are transgressed; *carnivalistic mesalliances*, which allows the unification of conventionally contrasting phenomena; and *profanation*, where those concepts normally held sacred are exposed to blasphemy. As Roberts (2013) contends, these elements also explain why carnivalesque protest borrows images and language from popular culture, through which it mocks and subverts the narratives associated with more serious conventional politics. As a mechanism of protest, the carnivalesque therefore purposely implants itself in popular culture, entwining sociopolitical discourses with everyday emotions. The same theme is also found in the Situationist movement and its tactics (e.g. détournement), which not only combined artistic practices and political action but also helped conceptualize play as being integrated into the very essence of political activism (Plant, 1992). To Vaneigem (2001[1967]), a spokesperson for the Situationist International, play itself should be considered a site of resistance, and something to be instrumentalized in the formation of a new society.

Video games, as an understudied form of popular culture in social movements, therefore might be explored at this junction of seriousness versus frivolousness, as well as materiality versus virtuality. The digital virtual, in which the players are rewarded with a refreshed understanding of their identities in economic and political contexts, is located at some point between the extremes of the totally abstract and the totally concrete (Shields, 2003). This new space not only exists where the material and virtual hybridize but also where there is an obscuring of the sharp distinction between consumption and production, work and leisure or the ruler and the ruled. Shields (2003) associates this in-between state of the digital virtual with Turner’s (1987: 29) definition of the *liminoid*, which is ‘the successor of the liminal in complex large-scale societies’. For definitive purposes, liminal refers to the quality of ambiguity or disorientation that occurs in the middle stage of rituals, that is, the ‘betwixt and between’ stages in the life process (Turner, 1974: 232). The liminal is a threshold encountered by pre-industrialized societies during a ritual or dramatic situation, the crossing of which involves a process of transformation. Liminoid, on the other hand, denotes a resemblance to the liminal, but not a replication. The term liminoid was coined by Turner (1987) to describe optional spaces for ludic play in modern industrialized societies. Individuals usually engage with liminoid spaces during their search for playful, out-of-the-ordinary experiences in everyday life. Such experiences often include commodified experiences in exotic vacation resorts, theme parks and other themed retail environments (e.g. Kozinets et al., 2002), as well as the virtual spaces, such as the Web or video games (Shields, 2003).

Similarly, as a form of *carnivalesque performance* which takes part in the liminoid (Bruner, 2005), street protests act as playful intervals from ordinary life, dominated by the actors of power. In this context, it is possible to explore how protest, play and games may interact in constructing, negotiating and disseminating novel meanings and understandings of the self and the environment. The embodiment of play in street protests is potentially the context in which gaming experiences and relevant references are most effective in creating a new language of resistance, the central issue addressed in this article. As will be further analysed through the interview data, this issue can be addressed by considering the incorporation of play into social movements, which opens up new venues for individual and social transformation, and the different ways that it contributes to activist campaigns.

Shepard et al. (2008) argue that play generally offers a nonviolent approach to engaging with power, which results in new understandings of social relations. It serves as a means for building communities of resistance, as well as enabling the participation of others in already established activist groups. Moreover, play facilitates the organization and coordination of a campaign, as it shares fundamental components. In other words, by incorporating play into protest, players find new ways of organizing, while actors broaden their repertoires for political action (Shepard, 2005).

A typical characteristic of contemporary political activism is its inclination to instrumentalize public spaces in order to confront and defy the existing order, as part of its carnivalesque nature. Such defiance is often realized through the occupation and interruption of ordinary life, allowing opportunities for social and political discussion (Blanco, 2013). In the existing literature, street art, alternative communal forms, fun and playfulness are identified as typical aspects of the collective consumption of public spaces during street activism. In these activities, participants are identified as the subject rather than object of the political discourse. This creates distance from hierarchical forms of organization and allows for any individual or group to carry out their own activity, celebrating the coexistence of individual and collective identities. Finally, street protests in recent years have been constituted on a principle of visionary performance, where the protesters perform the action which corresponds to the demands of the demonstration, such as creating a utopian public space (Rättilä and Rinne, 2012). The importance of such performative protest lies in its capability to show that another world is possible (Shepard, 2009), as well as mobilizing resistance and stimulating new forms of social organization (Tilly, 2008). It therefore constitutes an illustration of the future which the resistance aims to achieve. According to Breines (1989: 6), performative protest is a central task 'to create and sustain within the live practice of the movement, relationships and political forms that prefigured and embodied the desired society'. Recent literature based on worldwide practices of performative protest (e.g. Klepto and Evil, 2005; Routledge, 2012; Shepard, 2011) highlights the role of play and creativity in shifting public opinion and initiating change. Performative protest can take a variety of forms ranging from street parties (e.g. St. John, 2008) to guerrilla gardens (e.g. Roman, 2005), whose common central objective is to demonstrate alternative ways of understanding life.

As with all human experience occurring within the liminoid, street protests are essentially 'transforming performances' (Turner, 1986: 158), as they temporarily free individuals from the hierarchical secular roles and statuses maintained in everyday life and generate a new source of culture. Street protests, which are essentially playful experiences on the margins of serious daily life, routines and obedience to the established system, have the capability to initiate and promote the materialization of consumer fantasies initially experienced in video games. Therefore, they serve as a suitable context for exploring the role of video games in making sense of material real, a topic which still remains unexplored.

Method

The main research gap addressed by this article pertains to the transformation occurring as the individuals cross into the liminoid grounds of the digital virtual, which are supposedly rooted in modes of materialization of consumer fantasies through new media tools. The study also addresses how these fantasies are reflected in the material real within the context of political activism. For this purpose, video games were chosen as the domain of DVC, where the experience may refer either to the consumption of a fantastic object, including the desire for, ownership of, and experience of this object (Denegri-Knott and Molesworth, 2010), and its extension into the creation of a

projective identity (Gee, 2003). The domain of reflection is set as the period of the 2013 Gezi Protests, which potentially enabled the consumers to more clearly reflect on their previous fantastic consumption experiences, relatively free from constraints of societal rules due to their carnival-esque nature (Sener, 2013).

The literature suggests that a qualitative inquiry is a particularly appropriate method for studying consumer experiences as gamers and protesters (e.g. Molesworth, 2009; Pechtelidis, 2011). During the data collection process, qualitative techniques help to construct a deeper understanding of the phenomena, since qualitative research is 'exploratory, fluid and flexible, data-driven and context-sensitive' (Mason, 2002: 24). Moreover, qualitative approaches depend on personal expressions and behavioural observations, and during the data collection process, unstructured or semi-structured questions provide the respondents with the opportunity for the unrestricted expression of feelings and desires (Mariampolski, 2001). In this context, we primarily used in-depth interviews with semi-structured questions to obtain the detailed narratives of protest experience, as understood from a gamer's perspective.

Between June and October 2014, interviews were arranged with 12 individuals who participated in the Gezi Protests. Ten interviews were conducted face-to-face in Izmir, Turkey. Three initial informants were recruited from friends-of-friends, none of whom were personally known to the interviewers. These first informants were used to expand the sample to 10 for face-to-face interviews using a snowball approach. Snowball sampling was deemed a justifiable method of identifying potential informants in a context where interviews consisted of discussions of personal experiences of the unrest, heavily influenced by ideological viewpoints. This method also helped to protect privacy and confidentiality, as well as increase participant diversity. This group of 10 informants was informed that the interview would consist of an informal discussion of their personal experiences in the Gezi Protests – no mention of video games was made prior to the interviews, neither were informants required to be gamers. There were two reasons for this: first, to reduce demand characteristics and suggestibility bias, possibly arising either from an interpretation of the purpose of the study, and unconscious change in behaviour to fit that interpretation, or a misattribution of ideas previously suggested by the researcher. In other words, the aim was to examine spontaneous referrals to gaming experiences as accounts of DVC reflection, rather than those that resulted from a deliberate pre-thinking process prior to the interview. Second, as we were also interested in any differences between the reflections of gamers and non-gamers, it was important to have participants from both groups.

Two additional interviews were carried out via Skype with informants from other cities. These interviews differed from the 10 face-to-face interviews in two ways: the informants were identified based on posts on personal blogs or gaming e-zines, which included reflections of their experiences in the digital virtual during the Gezi Protests. These interviews therefore allowed for a more direct exploration of the existence of a potential interplay across the blurred lines of realities.

The sample was chosen to include a cross section of participants, with differences in terms of occupation, lifestyle, age and leisure activities. Informants were assured of anonymity, through the use of pseudonyms, and that no other identifying information would be used in any publications or reports based on the interviews. In order to facilitate referencing, a labelling system of informants' pseudonyms, gender and age is used, as indicated in Table 1.

Each interview lasted about 90 min and was audio-recorded with the permission of the informant, including those interviewed via Skype. In all interviews, a semi-structured questionnaire was used with predetermined questions and script, but improvisation was allowed for through follow-up questions to explore emerging topics. The main questions were formulated to encourage

Table 1. Informant profiles.

Pseudonym	Age, gender	Occupation	Relation to video games
Emre	28, male	Marketing manager	Gamer
Cengiz	23, male	Student	Gamer
Ufuk	22, male	Student	Gamer
Ilknur	23, female	Student	Gamer
Ozgur	31, male	Computer engineer	Gamer
Cem	25, male	Student	Gamer
Tugba	25, female	Chemical engineer	Gamer
Meltem	21, female	Student	Non-gamer
Sibel	22, female	Industrial engineer	Gamer
Ebru	20, female	Student	Non-gamer
Umut	28, male	Account manager	Gamer and blogger
Mehmet	26, male	Copywriter	Gamer and blogger

respondents to recount their personal experiences and stories of the Gezi Protests, and if DVC was mentioned, probing questions were used to generate discussion and reveal more in-depth information.

All the interviews and their transcriptions were in the native language of the interviewee. The 12 interview transcriptions, totalling 185 pages, were thoroughly read by all researchers to eliminate bias. The corpus was then systematically coded to identify emerging themes. For the data analysis, we followed Strauss and Corbin's (1998) axial coding procedure, in which a code is assigned to each paragraph and/or sentence. Next, the data were analysed for similarities and differences, with all the codes selectively grouped (selective coding). This procedure helped the researchers conceptualize and categorize the data, and decide on the main categories in the light of the research topic. As with the transcriptions, the analysis and selection of categories and emerging themes were conducted in Turkish, after which, selected extracts were translated into English. The findings of the study, supported with interview data, are presented in the following section.

Findings and discussion

This analysis is grounded in the experiences of 10 of the 12 participants, as two participants identified themselves as non-gamers and, not surprisingly, their stories did not reflect on any experiences of digital virtual environments. The remaining 10 informants almost always conceived their participation in the protests in terms of their experiences in video games, which is the digital virtual context of this study. For most interviewees, this became clear in the first 15 min of the interviews. During the content analysis, commonalities existing across the data were grouped into two emerging themes: The first is the *contextualization of the environment*, which pertains to physical surroundings, commodities and other participants, and also to the strategies used to deal with these during the protests. This theme largely corresponds to transition into and out of virtual space and corresponds closely to the literature on the boundaries of play. The second theme concerns the *contextualization of the self*, with regard to one's feelings, roles and position within lapses of reality, and strongly resembles accounts in the DVC literature which focus on explaining identity formation and transformations as players, consumers and protesters. Below, these two themes are explored in the light of extracts from the interviews.

Contextualization of the environment

Most informants reported that this was the first time they had participated in a demonstration and that they had previously identified themselves as ‘a political’. In most cases, their decision to participate arose from curiosity, the need to voice sudden anger or to express solidarity with others to whom they felt close. Lacking any previous experience of public protest environments, the informants’ expectations were based on information available from social media, particularly Twitter feeds, during the events.

On arriving at the scene, they appear to have crossed over a magic circle, or what one participant refers to below as a ‘portal’. With the usual routine of daily life left behind at home, this crossing is a *moment of truth*, allowing opportunities to understand oneself and one’s environment, with its game-like qualities of the unrest.

> It’s like, you know, you feel unreal because you know that mom is drinking tea at home or people are going on with their daily lives. But you are there in the protests. It is like walking through a portal into another world. In every other place things are in order, but not in that chaotic place you are in. (Tugba, 25F)

As frequently mentioned during the interviews, words like *chaotic*, *weird* and *odd* particularly relate to the extraordinary nature of the environment. In this context, Bakhtin’s (1984) four categories of the carnivalistic sense of the world can be seen as an appropriate approach for analysing the situation that the participants found themselves in. This is similar to what Bakhtin refers to as the effects of carnival on all people’s behaviour and rituals, which results in individuals becoming familiar with each other and each participant being involved in the carnival, and it becomes the part of the extraordinary during the protests, even when the interviewees least expected it.

> I actually did not expect much, as we were in Izmir, I thought it would rather besimilar to a concert or such.... But then ... weird things happened. Weird they were, and this is why I use this word. (Cengiz, 23M)

Clearly, what Cengiz expected was a legitimate leisure-like activity (like a concert), or at most, a traditional type of spatially limited demonstration built around a particular slogan. However, as with the general characteristics of protests of this kind, the carnival succeeded in penetrating the public space, allowing its participants to deviate from the norm and ignore social pressure, corresponding to Bakhtin’s second category for deviance from what is considered normal. For some informants, their greatest surprise regarding the environment was the unexpected qualities of the physical surroundings during the protests, such as burning barricades or shattered paving stones, which are not ordinary experiences of daily life. The physical appearance of the area therefore acted as an immediate indication of environmental contextualization. As a result of this perceived incongruity with ‘normal, real life’, this context was understood in terms of its resemblance to video game settings, as illustrated in the following quotations:

> We were around the hotel, we wouldn’t get inside, then a man with his face and eyes covered, said to us to not to go that way. There, windows were broken and so on, things were quite damaged, that side of the city, you know fire was blazing, and we were saying ‘Hey, it is Diablo, isn’t it? You know, we would go and kill some bosses’. (Ilknur, 23F)

> For example, I recall that very first day I went out, wow it's beautiful, I am wandering in post-apocalyptic RPG, everything is burning, things destroyed here and there (laughing). I liked that feeling, and I said myself, now I could die in peace. (Ufuk, 22M)

Another category that Bakhtin refers to in describing the carnivalesque is blasphemy of the sacred, which is apparent in the latter quotation. An orderly life which is safe and free from danger is a sacred ideal of the contemporary world. However, the liminoid space facilitated by the protests allowed participants to sanctify chaotic aspects of the experience. Moreover, chortles, giggles and laughter were frequent during the interviews, particularly when the informants told their story of the 'field'. This also ties closely into the carnivalesque, which is dominated by humour and laughter, distancing itself from the serious. Playfulness revealed itself in a number of emotions, ranging from pleasure to peacefulness, and it was eventually reflected through an understanding of oneself as if within the blurred domain of the digital virtual. In this context, an interesting feature of these accounts is the evidence they provide of a reverse process of immersion. As previously mentioned, immersion refers to a player's deep engagement with the virtual reality accompanying the perception of being physically present in a non-physical world (Coomans and Timmermans, 1997). The physical context is a critical element in achieving immersion, as players are heavily dependent on the spatial aspects to feel that the simulated world is perceptually convincing. As illustrated in the above quotations, the physical environment played an essential role in initiating such engagement, but on this particular occasion, the environment is one in which the individual perceives himself as a fantastic (non-physical or highly unlikely) creature (e.g. the hero in the Land of Diablo) living in a physically palpable world. This 'counter-immersion', where the virtual is now perceived to replace (or at least blend with) the concrete, results in players eventually transferring their DVC experiences into material spaces. For some informants, the immersion was so strong that 'real life was put on hold', indicating a difficulty in distinguishing the material real from those experiences still in transfer. Consider the below dialogue:

> No daily life there. What is the daily stuff, you know? It was not similar to anything, because we were really into it. For three days, everything was over for me, such as my relationship with my girlfriend or training. . . . I was walking down to where the tents were erected, and walking around Basmane. With a friend of mine, we were checking how things were going, and where the cops were, you know it was like . . . patrolling. . . . We were spreading and finding out where the cops were, and how many they were. How many Riot Control Vehicles were there, and where they are located.
>
> Interviewer: How could you make such decisions?
>
> Of course, it is somewhat, due to games . . . you know, everybody ignores them but they are incredible sources of information. Games are not just FIFA or PES. (Cem, 25M)

This example clearly illustrates that Cem perceived the environment of the demonstrations to be something within the liminoid, within that temporary break from normal activities such as hanging out with friends or going to the gym. Moreover, following this initial identification of the environment and his counter-immersion into it, he also navigated the fields of resistance based on experiences accumulated in the digital virtual. Our analysis revealed that such navigation not only included a detailed understanding of the physical context but also contributed to the development of a variety of strategies that involve spatial aspects. Consider the following quotation:

> Another thing was, there were people walking around the streets of Alsancak, marking the buildings with doors open, streets with fewer cars, choosing the places to hide in the streets, these people were not very common, but I am in one of them. I really admired these efforts indeed. What I did at first was the

same, though. I checked the doors of the buildings after 6 o'clock in the evenings, and inserted papers in holes of the doors if they are open, and so on, for any case of emergency . . . I memorize their places. . . . [When asked about why he was involved in such a behaviour] Frankly, I did this because I have been playing games since I was six [. . .] playing adventure. (Emre, 28M)

These accounts clearly showed that the informants had spontaneously developed a need to 'patrol' the area, both as a strategy in itself, to have a better understanding of the environment, and also as a precursor to other strategies of fighting or retreating. It also involved an identity transformation, in which the individual stepped into a guarding role. Strategies pertaining to the spatial aspects drew on video gaming experiences and were also evident in the decision for some to stay passive during the demonstrations. Ozgur, a 34-year-old engineer, explained his feelings about the clashes between the police and protesters, and the reasons for his rejection of such behaviour, as follows:

[Some of my friends] went [to the clash site]and [after a while] they came back. I asked what they gained, nothing [. . .] I said, 'If our goal is to clash with the police, then let's do it in Karşıyaka, a place near home, so that we can escape. Don't go and clash in Gündoğdu'. Because, I really spent many hours on strategy video games, *Medieval*, and *Command and Conquer* in the past, sometimes for 8–9 hours in one go, really [. . .] that area was not the best place to get into clash with the police. (Ozgur, 31M)

In addition to the physical environment, commodities also operated as inputs to environmental contextualization. Moreover, direct reflections of experiences in the digital virtual were also evident when the informants described their relationships with objects, mainly in forms of 'items' and 'weapons of war'. This provided remarkable evidence of how virtual experiences are reflected in the material real, particularly helping to understand how the abstract transforms into the concrete through its journey in the liminoid.

In the Gezi Park, what we faced were no different than Age of Empires, save that gas canisters replaced arrows, and Riot Control Vehicles replaced elephants, and we were little workers forging our own weapons to resist them.(Umut, 28M)

There were some people with weird fantasies, such as using a catapult against the police [. . .] One of my friends was planning to tie a rope to Riot Control Vehicle and pull it, I said 'Do you really mean it?' [. . .] I mean, he was also joking at the same time but you could have seen it in his eyes that he really believed that [. . .] He also said that medieval weapons should be used as in Ukraine, [. . .] that people had been using shields and swords, and wanted us to do the same [. . .] He is a kind of person who plays strategy computer games. I think that it is an individual difference. (Cengiz, 23M)

In these extracts, Umut defined his relationship with the objects in terms of an intertwining of the fantastic and the concrete, while Cengiz predominantly detailed the ways to actualize fantastic commodities in the material real, citing a close friend as an example. These were vibrant accounts representing consumers' attempts to actualize their consumption experiences in digital virtual contexts. One informant, a video game player for more than 20 years, went even further in actualizing his experiences in the material real, as illustrated in the following quotation:

Apart from that, what I took was an extra t-shirt in particular [. . .] I wore a swim mask and boots [. . .] I put extra water and other anti-acid stuff I could find at home . . . [. . .] Moreover, I took a rope with me, a long thick rope.

Interviewer: Why did you take it?

> I don't have any idea. . . . Later, we talked about the rope stuff with my friends [. . .]while creating a character in a game, you definitely include a rope in your inventory. [smiles] OK, now I feel ashamed . . . (Emre, 28M)

Interestingly, when asked if they had any previous practice of such acts and decisions, our informants immediately referred to their gaming experiences, and no other experience was mentioned in this connection. According to Mehmet, it was very common that the 'language of resistance was clearly established on the gaming experiences of this generation, a language which they knew the best and could eventually politicize'. However, our interview notes indicate that such referencing was almost always coupled with emotions of abashment or uneasiness, either expressed in words, or through gestures. One informant was concerned that the relevance of his video game experiences 'may be considered ridiculous'. In the above example, Emre later described how he had instinctively decided to take the rope, and how it then became a slightly embarrassing but humorous topic of conversation among his friends. From our perspective, these were again reflections of playfulness versus seriousness in the carnivalesque; however, because the informants expected the interviews to be serious conversations about the prolonged political tension, an expression of the playful was perceived to be a matter of concern.

When asked about the feelings that they experienced during the protests, they generally noted a contrast between their understanding of the environment and their own 'perceived roles' during the protests, which constituted another major theme, the contextualization of the self, detailed in the next section.

Contextualization of the self

The individual's self-concept or identity has been central to the studies of consumer behaviour for at least four decades, from the time that the modern consumer began to be recognized by his incessant desire for commodities to invent and reinvent his identity (Gabriel and Lang, 1995). Similar to other realms of consumption, video games constitute a contemporary outlet for consumers to explore, assume and express identities through their characters, avatars and roles (Klimmt et al., 2009). Identities developed through DVC, and their reflections in the material real emerged as common themes during our analysis. The individuals' assumed roles, and their transitory position between the abstract and concrete contributed to a novel contextualization of the self, evident in relation to experiences in the digital virtual.

A recurrent theme was participants feeling that they were assuming a unique role or bringing a character to life. When asked about how it felt to participate in the protests, one informant highlighted her role as follows:

> What do I feel at that moment? It is completely different there, you know, it was like I was given a quest. . . . I cannot express it clearly [but as with other people] I had a feeling that I was doing something very serious, and I should passionately do it, to make it well at the end.

Then she was asked to further explain what she meant by being 'given a quest':

> You know, there is something to do, and if we could complete it at the end . . . there would be a payback, [. . .] something would change, we would all level up [. . .]I am not the kind of person who can throw stones or do something that requires physical strength, but I at least was able to perform medical assistance, hand out gasmasks, like a medic. (Ilknur, 23F)

As frequently recognized by the informants, a division of labour was very noticeable during the protests; the protesters were spontaneously engaged in tasks that they deemed most appropriate at that moment. The various tasks ranged from tearing up paving stones to administering home-made anti-tear gas remedies. In this context, the *quest* pursued by Ilknur required her to act as the *medic* of the party, as she was physically restricted from taking a more combative role. Cengiz noted how he felt about those different groups performing a variety of tasks:

> People spraying anti-acid solutions. . . . I would really like to thank them [. . .] They were behind the scene but never unimportant. They are like medics. And those people collecting stones and preparing fireworks, they are good folks, I love them. (Cengiz, 23M)

Cengiz highlights that their perception of teamwork resembles cooperation in online game campaigns, and both these informants' use of the English word *medic* was a likely reference to common video game characters. The informants were therefore further required to clarify how they perceived role divisions during the events, and what they meant particularly by the word medic. Not surprisingly, both cited their gaming experiences, while Ilknur replied as 'a medic. . . . Just like in the Tiberian Sun, you know. . . . Warfare and such'.

These findings are strongly indicative of self-contextualization through creation of an identity. From a video games perspective, several researchers suggest that gamers, as learners, may work at creating alternative selves or projective identities (Gee, 2003; Turkle, 1997). A projective identity is a quasi-virtual self that the player struggles to become within the game, a transition between the player's real-world and virtual identities, 'a space in which the learner can transcend the limitations both of a virtual identity and real-world identity' (Gee, 2003: 66), which is essentially liminoid. Another striking illustration of how these identities in the material real were undertaken as reflections of digital virtual experiences was presented by Ufuk, a 22-year-old university student. On the second day of the protests, Ufuk claimed a leading role and organized his friends into pairs, each responsible for the other, rather than joining in the clash as a larger group. When asked if he had such previous experience, he smiled and added:

> No, only the games, you know (giggling). Generally, I may sound a little bit narcissistic [. . .] I trust my reasoning about practical issues [. . .] I believe games provide you with these skills, because you have to think of alternative ways [. . .] while playing an adventure game, or solving a puzzle. (Ufuk, 22M)

While Ufuk contextualized his protester identity as an elaboration of skills sharpened by video games, other informants further discussed their cases of *shape-shifting* and reversal of roles, as a particular reflection of digital virtual experiences. According to Cem, his identity was comparable to the characters he developed in video games, while for Umut, the exercise of a particular personality trait in the liminoid increased the likelihood of its actualization in the material real:

> You wouldn't recognize me at all. Incredibly intelligent and unbelievably creative [. . .] This was the role I claimed for myself, and while I was acting it, even my gender was not negligible. [What mattered was] the person who you would like to be, and the way you would like to serve. (Cem, 25M)
>
> In Baldur's Gate, most people assault the King's Guard to loot his armour, and are usually beaten to death. Here, then, people really confronted the police, and they even took control over the Riot Control Vehicle . . . or the helmets and such [. . .] Those folks who played against the police in Counter Strike, have definitely felt themselves powerful enough to confront and resist the police at Gezi. (Umut, 28M)

Gezi was characterized by the significant violence that occurred between the police and protestors, which was unfamiliar to the previously apolitical youthful masses mainly from the more affluent Western Turkey. Combined with the carnivalesque qualities of occupying urban space and embracing the increasingly popular principles of 'diversity, creativity, decentralization, horizontality and direct action' (Ainger et al., 2003: 174), these clashes may also be perceived as romanticized accounts of revolution. In this context, our findings suggest the presence of a symbolic value of knowledge transfer during the clashes, in which video games provide a venue for protesters to reimagine themselves battling an evil, whether it is a cop, a creeper or another monstrous creature.

In general, these rich narratives of reflection highlight the clear need for a discussion of the transitions between the abstract, virtual and material spaces. Notably, the ways in which individuals perceived this transition from the virtual to material real were regularly highlighted during the interviews. In this context, an interesting finding of the study was that the informants were clearly able to substantialize the boundary of the material real, which corresponded to *fear*, usually manifested in the tangible possibility of being subjected to physical torture, or even death. Through their use of notions associated with virtual terrains, perceptions of their presence in transition between the abstract and the concrete were clearly traceable in the following responses.

> My friend said, 'Be careful, there is no resurrection here'. (Ilknur, 23F)
>
> I had five lives and I attended the protests for five days. You can lose one of them on each day. (Sibel, 22F)

As suggested by these comments, the palpable fear of being injured or killed constituted the border to the material world, the point at which the transition through the liminoid was accomplished. Interestingly, for most protestors, this fear constituted the threshold over which they were able to pass when they decided to come out onto the streets, rather than stay in the safety of material normality at home (Inceoglu, 2014). The concept that the feeling of fear is constitutive of this boundary may be traced in the literature. There is contradiction in conceptualization of fear which has been understood as an oppressor or liberator in different works. In traditional literature on emotions, fear is accepted as a force that disempowers (Robin, 2004). However, recent research on activism highlights the role of emotions, including fear, to empower participants as a positive force (Brown and Pickerill, 2009; Routledge, 2012). Considering that differences in spatial and temporal circumstances evoke different emotions, it is plausible that these contradictory findings may be explained by the intensity and speed of change of emotional states acting as the porous membrane between the virtual and material. In this particular study, we argue that strong emotional states of *awe* (including both fear and astonishment as previously mentioned) constitute the boundary between these two realities.

To conclude, our findings reveal that the journey from the abstract to the concrete takes a route departing from consumer fantasies, travelling through the liminoid for an initial actualization of those fantasies in the digital virtual and rupturing into the material real as its final destination, whenever it finds a convenient opening. Accompanied by alternative contextualizations of the environment and the self, through the physical space, commodities, strategies and assumed roles, the journey serves to remove the so-called 'immobility' of extreme consumer fantasies, and paves the way for a rejuvenated understanding of transgression between states of reality and the possible, as per Shields' ontology. In this context, these findings on virtual reflections in the material reality not only address some recent literature gaps (e.g. Denegri-Knott and Molesworth, 2010) but also

open up a new domain for discussion in scholarly studies of consumption, political activism and, most importantly, video games.

Conclusion

Jenkins (2004: 123) suggests that video games are complex forms of 'environmental storytelling', due to their capability of allowing the realization of the spatiality of phantasmagorical stories and providing the players with an 'immersive narrative experience'. Based on its storytelling nature, Buchanan-Oliver and Seo (2012) conceptualize the gaming experience as a hypermedia activity, in which the integration of play and storytelling enhances individuals' engagement with both the story and the interpretation of their experiences (Thompson, 1997). Therefore, similar to any cultural, social and economic experience in material reality, the narrative experiences in digital virtual contexts help the individuals to invent and reinvent their respective identities, but in this case without being bounded by the ideal or actual limitations of existence. If digital video games are capable of creating imagined future selves, and have the potential to enhance identity formation and transformation in a variety of contexts, then it is plausible that reflecting on these liminoid experiences will contribute to the development of political identity and behaviours. The available literature, however, lacks detailed insights into this area.

In this article, we studied the role of gaming experiences in the context of political activism, taking into account the playful and carnivalesque nature of protest, which presumably facilitates a continuous transgression in and over the blurred boundaries between the material real and virtual real. In our attempt to understand this process, we also sought to identify practices of digital virtual consumption, and how these are instrumentalized through the transition. As an exploratory study, our conclusions below not only address several issues embedded in the domain of play, politics and consumption but also offer new conceptualizations leading to a broader understanding how the experiences in the digital virtual realms are reflected in material reality.

Our findings suggest that virtual experiences in video games have obvious manifestations in the material world, which may occur either as contextualization of the environment or of the self, through physical settings, commodities, strategies and roles. Not surprisingly, in this process of making sense of information, a critical role is played by ingrained qualities of the situation from which the information originates. In our particular domain of street protests, the carnivalesque, and therefore liminoid, nature of the event is at the heart of the transgression, facilitating an easier inward and outward permeation of experience and feelings. The carnivalesque creates an alternative social space, characterized by freedom, equality and abundance, embodied in role-play and reversal of roles, laughter, mockery and humour, playfulness, celebration and collective action. These characteristics are not only central to street protests but also to experimentation with fantasies in the digital virtual, which facilitate the reflection of these experiences in the material real. Moreover, experiences of public protest overlap with the experiences in video games in three major aspects as previously discussed: consumption of public space, simultaneous protection of individual and collective identity and the performance of the vision (Rättilä and Rinne, 2012). Based on our findings, we discuss these further below.

Contemporary political movements are characterized by the occupation of public spaces in order to create new venues to discuss political and social transformation. The politics of space not only pertains to material urban spaces (e.g. the streets) but also extends to virtual spaces, particularly understood as the Internet and its surroundings (Papacharissi, 2002). As Spiegel (2015) argues, all these public spaces are now at risk of becoming corporatized and therefore are

appropriate grounds for reclamation and resistance. In this context, similar to urban spaces, video games can simultaneously be understood as both a simulation of subjugation and also liberation.

On the one hand, video games are a media of Empire, as elaborately argued by Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009). According to the authors, video games once seemed to be associated purely with fun, but the media is now 'revealing itself as a school for labour, an instrument of rulership, and a laboratory for the fantasies of advanced techno-capital' (p. xix). The ludocapitalist system exercised by the Empire allows for virtual goods or skills to be exchanged for real currencies, creating game-spaces of productive labour in the less affluent East to feed the consummative in-game desires of the affluent West (Dibbell, 2005). In other words, video games are merely another element of the hypercapitalist sphere, mimicking the economic, social and political facets of real-world capitalism. On the other hand, the role of video games has no lesser potential than other aspects of new media in enabling new understandings of citizenry. In this context, video games allow the players to experiment with innovative ways to interact economically, politically and socially; for example, by providing the players with a relatively safe and convenient opportunity to experiment with their own *occupation*, whether this involves building a city, leading an army or driving a racing car. These playful occupations in video games then harbour the cultural production of identities and relationships, and the negotiation of a wide array of matters, with links from and back to the material real (Castronova, 2005), a theme which was strongly emphasized in the interviews.

The second characteristic of contemporary street movements is the defiance of hierarchical forms of organization, and encouragement of collective actions of individuals or smaller groups co-existing within the broader meaning of resistance. Appraisal of individual identity and prioritization of non-hierarchical small groups have strong parallels with gaming experiences, as reflected by our informants' apparent ease in specifying individual goals or forming temporary teams during the protests. This was very clearly evident in one respondent's reorganization of his friends into smaller independent groups, while encouraging vigilance between the groups for collective safety.

Finally, performative protest is a common element in contemporary street movements, whose aims and practices were discussed in detail in previous sections. The protest is a dramatization of claims, which extends beyond the boundaries of the protest action itself, into the repertoires of all involved (Tilly, 2008). Gaming experiences improve the players' ability to visualize and achieve desired 'outcomes' and alternative realities; such outcomes are evidently actualized in a similar manner during visionary performances in street protests. As our data shows, these three aspects of video gaming also provide the players with a venue for reimagining themselves in the material real, evoking and, in all likelihood, romanticizing their memories and experiences of the digital virtual.

An inevitable consequence of engaging with the digital virtual is continuous and unrestricted experimentation with alternative identities, which then contributes to episodes of expansive learning (Francis, 2012). In these episodes, people or groups begin 'to radically question the sense and meaning of the context and to construct a wider alternative context' (Bateson, 1972; Engestrom, 2005: 138), leading to transformations of individual and group identities in a variety of contexts. Our findings suggest that video games, in particular, amplify these transformations, not only because they allow the players to experiment with their consumer and political identities through utilization of fantastic objects and positions but also due to their empowerment of further articulations of play in a general sense. Our findings strongly support the concept of play as being 'a device that both dramatized existing social divisions and promoted the formation of new groupings centred on the playground', and hence 'permitting the negotiation of social identity'

(Henricks, 2006: 18), and thus opening space for a 'public dialectic in which people try to advance their own personal, cultural and social positions' (p. 19).

As revealed through the analysis, these contextualizations can be said to play on the borders of reality, with back and forth movements into the liminoid terrain of digital virtual. Based on Shields' (2003) conceptualization, this article therefore offers substantial evidence of a reverse-direction rotation of identity transformation in consumption and political contexts, which begins with the abstract, and passes through the virtual to reach the concrete, as a result of possibilities offered by sophisticated video-game technologies.

From a practical perspective, the article provides valuable insight for understanding the evolution of consumer performances, based on fantasies and an examination of how these are transformed into material spaces of consumption. Moreover, it has created the potential for consumer studies to further focus on the play aspect, which appears to dominate postmodern consumer behaviour. This is a key contribution, as the literature in this domain has been relatively negligent in regard to the rich theory of play. Additionally, this article delves deep into the playfulness and the carnivalesque character of street protests, particularly those in the form of occupying public spaces, by revealing gamers' movements back and forth between the material real and the liminoid terrain of the digital virtual. This may facilitate a reconceptualization of political participation as a reflection of what is experienced in the liminoid grounds of consumer imagination and fantasies. Given the dramatic decrease in traditional forms of political participation (such as voting or campaigning activities), video games may also be suitable for exploration and utilization as a source of digital political participation.

The limitations of the study are mainly related to the subjective and abstract quality of qualitative techniques. The limited number of participants, difficulties in the recruitment process due to the highly politically sensitive nature of the discussion and the focus on a particular event as the reflection of virtual experiences may be considered as other major limitations. Future research should continue to gather perspectives on how virtual experiences are reflected in the material real, both from a general standpoint, and specifically with respect to political consumption, particularly in those countries where mass protests have erupted in recent years.

Note

1. Abbreviation stands for *Grand Theft Auto*, a best-selling action-adventure video game series by Rockstar Games, 1997–2015.

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