

From Aesthetic to Epistemic Consumption: Analyzing Knowledge Pathways in Consumption Collectives

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Abstract— This paper explores the collective pursuit of quasi-scientific knowledge practices as a consumption activity. By empirically analyzing the highly-specialized collective practice of *game-breaking* we grant insights into consumption collectives constituting knowledge systems. We show that the collective explorative endeavor of epistemic consumption relegates the aesthetic dimension of collective consumption to the backstage. By uncovering knowledge pathways, this study sheds light on the structuring forces of knowledge in consumption collectives in contemporary consumer culture.

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I. INTRODUCTION

For well over 2000 hours, Informant 1 (26 years old) has now been playing the video-game *Super Mario 64*, a game he used to play as a child. However, instead of casually playing through the game, letting the game guide him, getting lost in the game's storyline, and immersing into the colorful world of *Super Mario 64*, for hours Informant 1 has been concentratedly playing the same sequence over and over. Together with ten fellow-players, Informant 1 tries to save time, some frames or even some seconds if they do well. By division of labor, they are currently working to complete the game in less than four minutes and 55 seconds. In fact, *Super Mario 64* is not about speed at all, but about reaching the end of the game in the first place. Released in 1996 by *Nintendo*, the game is designed as a single-player game for six hours of gameplay or more. By now, Informant 1 and his fellow players know every aspect of every single level, every trigger, every opponent, every item, and everything about the physics of the game, which allows them to further *break the game* and thus to save more time. For further analysis of the game, frame-specific data regarding the frame count, the position in space, the memory cache, Mario's speed per frame, and much more information is displayed.

Game-breakers like Informant 1 are well-connected and engaged technology enthusiasts who are keen to experiment.

They enjoy the intellectual challenge of creatively exploring the game to overcome limitations and to achieve novel and clever outcomes. To reach their goal they collectively, dedicatedly, patiently, and persistently engage in, sometimes painstaking, quasi-scientific processes for hundreds over hundreds of hours of exploring, analyzing, deconstructing, and optimizing. Hereby, consumers become researchers and developers. We define game-breaking as a highly demanding activity of collaboratively exploring a focal game to optimize for speed. Game-breaking exists since video games have been around. However, once an underground hobby conducted by videogame players exchanging footage through obscure internet forums, since 2010 it has become an ever more rapidly growing global phenomenon, influencing the multi-billion dollar video game industry (Lewis, 2020; Warman, 2019). Worldwide, game-breakers actively discuss in forums and via livestreaming platforms and stream and upload videos, with the most popular videos viewed tens of millions of times.

Studying game-breaking is interesting because it allows us to better understand the epistemic dimension of consumption in consumption collectives. This case is theoretically rich, as game-breakers do not (primarily) focus on the aesthetic and/or symbolic dimension of consumption but *consume epistemics*. Hence, this collective is heavily and obviously pervaded by (epistemic) knowledge. New insights into knowledge-intensive consumption collectives allow us to better understand

phenomena in contemporary consumer culture such as expert systems (Latour & Deighton, 2018), nerd-cultures (Seregina & Weijo, 2016), self-trackers (Bode & Kristensen, 2016; Etkin, 2016; Lupton, 2014), users of smart technology (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017; Bettany & Kerrane, 2016; Hoffman & Novak, 2017), online forums (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2015), open-source (Arvidsson, 2011), fandom (Kozinets, 2012), craft consumption (Campbell, 2005; Watson & Shove, 2008), and consumers communing around complex focal objects (Muniz & Schau, 2005). This literature has shown us, that collective consumption is inherently intertwined with knowledge and that there are no consumption collectives not pervaded by knowledge. However, we know little about the epistemic dimension of consumption since prior analysis of collective consumption has primarily focused on its symbolic, aesthetic and/or cultural dimension (cf. Kozinets, Patterson, & Ashman, 2016; Maciel & Wallendorf, 2016; Schau, Muñoz Jr, & Arnould, 2009; Seregina & Weijo, 2016). To close this gap, we do not take knowledge, its existence, and its characteristics in consumption collectives as an epistemological *a priori* but ask: *How is Knowledge Practiced in Consumption Collectives?* To answer this question, we conducted a case-study on game-breakers, using interviews and netnographic inquiry (Belk, Fischer, & Kozinets, 2013). We followed game-breakers online, as well as on special occasions such as on fairs or meet-ups, resulting in numerous hours of netnographic investigation, as well as in ten informal interviews and eight recorded in-depth interviews. We extend the state of research as we study game-breaking collectives by focusing on pervasive circulating knowledge *pathways*. Hereby, we learn (1) how individuals communize¹ around knowledge-intensive domains provoking complex consumption activities, and (2) how the epistemic dimension of consumption decisively shapes consumption practices. We contribute to the analysis of *know-how* (Maciel & Wallendorf, 2016; Seregina & Weijo, 2016), of consumption knowledge (experiential expertise) (Clarkson, Janiszewski, & Cinelli, 2012), and of tacit knowledge (Arsel & Bean, 2012) in consumption collectives. We uncover that consumers craft *epistemic knowledge* in quasi-scientific ways internally in consumption collectives. Adding to the vast literature strand on aesthetic and/or symbolic consumption we show, that these individuals do not only contribute to the knowledge system for building social status (Kozinets, 2001; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), for establishing interpersonal connections (Cova, 1997, 1999), or for defining their identity (Arnould & Thompson, 2005) but that knowing and the knowledge-system (at least partially) guides their passion. Hereby, we neither draw on knowledge in a Bourdieuan sense of accumulable field-specific disposition nor in a Wittgensteinian sense of (sub)cultural *competence* (Schatzki, 1996; Warde, 2005) but analyze knowledge and knowledge pathways in their epistemic sense (Knorr Cetina, 1999).

II. ANALYZING KNOWLEDGE PATHWAYS

Building on Lévi-Strauss' (1966) pioneering analysis of human (problem-solving) thinking, we trace *knowledge pathways* in consumption collectives emphasizing the collective (questioning) mindset "that uses knowledge, experimentation, and speculation to solve problems and reach goals" (Maciel & Wallendorf, 2016, p. 728). Hereby, we analyze pathways of knowledge in consumption collectives from their creation, to the legitimization, to the dissemination, to the archivation and thus uncover the structuring forces of knowledge as well as different natures of pervasive knowledge.

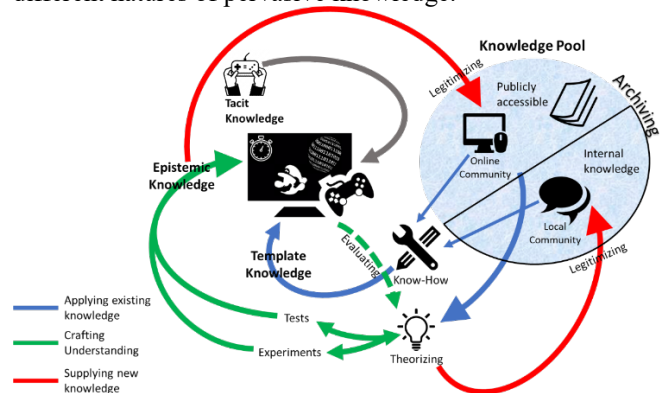


Figure 1: Knowledge Pathways in Game-Breaking Collectives

We show that knowledge-intensive consumption collectives archive knowledge, e.g. in wikis or forums. This archived knowledge is applied as a basis for further investigation. To gain new knowledge, mostly game-breakers firstly theorize possible ways of further breaking the game. New theories/hypotheses are shared with the game-breaking collective. Based on this, game-breakers engage in an iterative process between testing/experimenting and theorizing/hypothesizing. If improvements of the game are not discovered by accident, they are systematically and often collectively worked out in tests or experiments. We call this crafted knowledge *epistemic knowledge* based on the quasi-scientific quality of the settings from which it emerges (Knorr Cetina, 1999). Even if tacit knowledge is often required for performing certain actions, epistemic knowledge is not tacit but codified and explicated. Through this crafted understanding, the game is further optimized. Crafted epistemic knowledge is often instantly shared with the collective via video platforms or blogs. Here, it is discussed by the collective and thereby legitimized or not. Only by social legitimization practices such as submission processes, epistemic knowledge becomes new knowledge that extends the knowledge pool and is taken for granted henceforth.

This analysis of knowledge pathways uncovers that in game-breaking collectives epistemic consumption relegates the symbolic and/or aesthetic dimension to the backstage. We conclude that game-breakers rather consider the game as a set of data which can successively be unfolded by collective

¹ Translated by Schatzki (2002), original: *Vergemeinschaftung* (Weber, 1922)

investigative and explorative practices in a spirit of playfulness to craft understanding than an aesthetic consumption object as which it was originally designed. That is why we conceptualize the game as an *epistemic object* (Knorr Cetina, 1997; Zwick & Dholakia, 2006).

This study grants insights into knowledge-intensive consumption collectives constituting knowledge systems. Not only consumption communities in their narrower sense but all collectives pervaded by knowledge can hereby be re-enquired. We show a new but increasingly important form of consumption collectives where consumers primarily communize to enter the knowledge system, as well as to contribute and hereby challenge the market, and do not (only) do so for aesthetic and/or symbolic reasons.

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