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Seeking community through battle: understanding the meaning of consumption processes for warhammer gamers' communities across borders

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Introduction

In his pioneering article, Cova (1997) examines how people form bonds through consuming products and experiences in a postmodern society. He suggests individuals form 'tribes' through these consumption processes. Each tribe

contains unique social and interpersonal dynamics, which are often related to the shared product or brand thus forming what Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) name a 'brand community'. This chapter explores tribe and brand community concepts within a gaming context by examining meanings inherent to consumption processes for US and French participants of a battle re-enactment game titled Warhammer. To date, very little consumer culture research has examined gaming communities from this perspective.

This chapter will first examine literature on consumption tribes indicating how various approaches define and influence consumption scholarship with notions of community. We then contextualize Warhammer via gaming literature to describe the game's unique traits, which enable complex consumption experiences for enthusiasts. After this discussion, the results from our comparative analysis of consumption experiences are presented, and a discussion is initiated on the limitations of using postmodern concepts of tribe and brand community. We also highlight the importance of engaging these concepts with a poststructural perspective. We argue our results situate and synthesize the Warhammer gaming community in between postmodern and poststructural approaches, which suggests a rethinking is needed in terms of describing consumption experiences.

Warhammer gamers constitute a unique social group that share specific experiences resulting from the manner in which the role-playing game is designed and played. In order to better understand the study of experiential meanings during consumption processes between US and French Warhammer gamers, literature on consumption tribes helps to create a context in which to reference these processes.

Consumption tribes

A tribal approach to consumption practices (Cova and Cova, 2002) analyses consumer groups through consumption experiences and cultural patterns rather than by demographic features such as age, gender or by psychographic features such as attitudes, opinions and interests. As Thompson and Troester (2002) point out, this approach to understanding consumers emphasizes aspects of social and interpersonal dynamics, similarities or differences in rituals and the emotional relationship that consumers experience with the brand, event and others in the community. Arnould and Price's (1993) river rafters or Celsi, Rose, and Leigh's (1993) skydivers may or may not resemble their demographic characteristics, but they share meanings attached to the experience of skydiving or river rafting. In the river rafting trips undertaken in the Colorado river basin, the tribe enacts activities in a certain sequence, which resembles a notion of sacred rituals for the participants. As a result, they exchange a shared expectation of satisfaction. Similarly, skydivers get involved in activities such as dirt-dive choreography, the ascent, the exit, the free fall, and under canopy. The divers are well acquainted with these rituals and share similar motives.

Mountain men share a fantasy consumption experience of a historic primitive ritual in the Rocky Mountain American West (Belk and Costa, 1998), while natural health seekers share a common value system that manifests wellness-oriented consumption outlooks and practices, which are nourished and shared among the tribal members (Thompson and Troester, 2002).

Each of these groups has a very specific need that is satisfied through consumption experiences. As Belk and Costa (1998, p. 218) describe for mountain men, 'participation in the fantasy world offers a special opportunity for transformative play, while reinforcing a romanticized set of beliefs'. Similarly, the dramatic white water river rafters experience 'absorption and integration', 'personal control', 'joy and valuing', and a 'newness of perception and process' as described by Celsi et al. (1993). Such an understanding of needs among tribal members sought through various activities is critical in the process of understanding the ways in which individuals consume games, products, or experiences.

Other researchers such as Schouten and McAlexander (1995) describe communities formed around specific brands. Here, similar to high-risk experiences such as skydiving, tribes are formed around shared consumption experiences of a commercial product. Schouten and McAlexander (1995) describe the consumption experience of Harley-Davidson motorcycle owners and analyse the social structure, dominant values and symbolic behaviours that represent this subculture. Similar tribes exist around media programmes such as *X-Files*, *West Wing* and *Star Trek*.

Somewhat similar to Schouten and McAlexander (1995), Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001, p. 412) define brand community as a 'specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand'. Such a community provides identity to its members, and is surrounded around a brand that is commercially marketed, most often in mass media. The authors suggest there are three core markers of community; '(1) members have a shared sense of belonging to the community, (2) members share rituals and traditions, (3) members feel a sense of moral responsibility towards each other' (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001, p. 413).

This study adopts Muñiz and O'Guinn's (2001) conceptualization of brand community in its comparative analysis of US and French Warhammer tribes. Although Warhammer is more than a specific brand *per se*, the name does define a commercial product and gaming experience for members of a particular community. Before describing our results, it is important to note how Warhammer and other similar games can cultivate and create unique experiences for enthusiasts.

Warhammer

Forget the power of technology, science and common humanity.
Forget the promise of progress and understanding, for there is no

> peace amongst the stars, only an eternity of carnage and slaughter and the laughter of thirsting gods.
>
> (Warhammer, 2001)

Warhammer is a tabletop game that requires space to accommodate figurines and additional items such as small trees or hills. In order to participate, players need a basic start-up kit with a small army and an extensive rulebook. The army consists of various figurines that resemble different creatures. Each figurine has distinct characteristics and values that affect the manner in which the game is played. In addition, each figurine is used to compete with other participants' armies through various spells and 'battlefield' scenarios. Competition is regulated through extensive rules, which determine how figurines or armies defeat others through the accumulation of 'damage scores'.

According to the rulebook, these scores increase when players are able to defeat their opponents during various battle scenarios. Other than the club scene, there is also a thriving Warhammer online community at web addresses such as http://www.dawnofwargame.com/homepage.php that tend to focus on science fiction rather than a medieval period battlefield.

Figure 14.1 A Warhammer battlefield.

Warhammer belongs to a more than 30-year old lineage of fantasy role-playing games (FRPGs) that have transfixed young males for decades. FRPGs are

characterized by 'fantasy personas' (Waskul and Lust, 2004, p. 343) gamers enact and play on a battlefield while negotiating rules and outcomes with the game master (Fine, 1983). FRPGs can also be considered a conduit where the social world is uniquely assigned by each gamer (Fine, 1983). Sometimes referred to as a 'leisure subculture' (Fine, 1983, p. 237), FRPGs have been conceived as a caricature of social life (Coleman, 1989) since gamers share an experience, a social structure, common activities, norms and values (Fine, 1983).

Mathews (1997) aids the discussion of FRPGs by contrasting fantasy literature with science fiction, utopian fiction and satire. He notes these three literature forms are more or less based on certain logical and scientific explanations. Fantasy literature defies this scientific logic. FRPGs, especially those based in the medieval period, tend to follow this pattern. FRPGs also differ from other games since 'the game is not competitive, has no time limits, is not scored, and has no definitions of winning or losing' (Waskul and Lust, 2004, p. 336). Instead, players have flexibility to work with the rules and outcomes and are required to cooperate to overcome an environmental challenge. Fine (1983, p. 233) argues such cooperation 'provides an opportunity for the development of collective sociability'. Since players are required to enact fantasy characters, these games end up 'more like games of mimicry than chance or competition' (see Caillois [1958] 2001 in Waskul and Lust, 2004, p. 336).

Warhammer enables collective sociability and mimicry with its use of various miniatures on a 'battlefield' (Figure 14.1). Besides the figurines in the start-up kit, there are several different kinds of figures with distinct characteristics and values that can be additionally purchased. In addition, extensive rules apply to the game. According to the rulebook, scores increase when players are able to defeat their opponents during various battle scenarios.

Like other fantasy games such as Dungeons and Dragons, Warhammer requires players to take on personas of fictitious characters to create life on a medieval period battlefield. What differentiates Warhammer from other FRPGs is that these gamers do not just enact the characters, they meet together to create the figurines, as well as the rest of the battlefield. This heavy investment of time, physical and mental energy, and ability to control the game in order to display the artefacts of self-expression makes Warhammer unique. Such a heavy commitment to the game also results in an intense emotional attachment.

Although small but growing (DeRenard and Kline, 1990), additional literature on FRPGs also connects social and cultural aspects of gaming. Starting from a seminal work on Dungeons and Dragons gamers by Gary Alan Fine (1983), with a more recent followup by Waskul and Lust (2004), and other games in online versions (see Diablo II by McBirney, 2004), these studies tend to focus on the cultural aspects of games and the gamers. There have also been studies focusing on gamers' psychological makeup and social behaviours in comparison to non-gamers (Douse and McManus, 1993; Lancaster, 1994).

Understanding gaming brand community: a case of warhammer gamers in the US and France

In order to gain a greater understanding of cross-border consumption processes for Warhammer enthusiasts, we conducted a total of 24 in-depth interviews in Marseilles, France and Madison, Wisconsin (USA), as well as collected data via naturalistic inquiry during a three week period.[1] Our participants were overwhelmingly male and were quite similar to other FRPG gamers. For example, Fine (1983) describes Dungeons and Dragons gamers as 'young and unmarried college graduate males who often read science fiction, fantasy and history' (p. 47). Fine (1983) argues that the content of the game, and the nature of recruitment into this subsociety make it unattractive for women.

Adolescents, similar to some subcultures, often form worlds of their own through these games, which are different from their adult contemporaries. The medieval context of FRPGs is especially attractive since it allows gamers to form an enclave away from logic and scientific reasoning of the adult world. McBirney (2004) considers this experience as an opportunity to escape from reality. In Mathews' (1997, p. 1) words, 'fantasy enables us to enter worlds of infinite possibility. The maps and contours of fantasy are circumscribed only by imagination itself. The breathtaking sweep of its scope can be awesome and even frightening'. In sum, the game's structure allows participants to be creative and imagine various war scenarios, as well as fabricate the miniatures that are involved in the game.

Several consumption themes evolved from the interviews and observations in the US and France. In terms of 'socialization' as a theme, both American and French Warhammer gamers socialize a lot among themselves when they play, however, they are less likely to hang out together outside of the game environment. We found this theme to reveal an interesting contradiction in the nature of their socializing. The American gamers feel a sense of being looked upon as outcasts by the outside world due to their interest in Warhammer. On the other hand, French players seem to face a certain sense of opposition from mainstream society for their indulgence in an imaginary game with figurines now that they are young adults. Nonetheless, these perceived societal perceptions do not prevent Warhammer enthusiasts from continuing to socialize in the game room.

When the socialization consumption theme of American and French Warhammer gamers is compared with gaming literature, certain similarities and differences become apparent. The peculiar form of socialization among Warhammer gamers confirms previous gaming studies. Davis (1983) suggests gamers exhibit lower scores on feelings of sympathy and concern for others, while Fine (1983, p. 44) notes they have relatively high levels of aggression and may appear more introverted in nature. On the other hand, gamers report

[1] Details on this study have already been reported in Cova, Pace, and Park (forthcoming). We summarize those findings there.

themselves to be more imaginative (Holmes, 1981). In addition, they are more likely to describe themselves as scientific and prefer to play with computers and read, rather than visit the cinema, theatre, concerts, or attend parties (Douse and McManus, 1993).

American Warhammer enthusiasts also hold a strong attraction to violent imagery when they describe the various aspects of the game. They are also interested in reading violent books and watching violent TV shows and movies. For French informants, violence seemed less relevant. What interests the French more is the opportunity to regress to a medieval era that may be best experienced by imagination. On the other hand, both American and French informants experience a sense of accomplishment after investing time and effort in painting and assembling warrior replicas, as well as when they win over more experienced players and thus master the game. However, French informants experience accomplishment more from clever strategic moves than any other activity.

In addition, Warhammer gamers feel a sense of accomplishment from personally creating figurines, which can be considered a form of an extension of the self (Waskul and Lust, 2004). Moreover, FRPGs can become challenging due to the demands on the gamers to play with three intersecting roles of 'persona, player and person' (Waskul and Lust, 2004). Persona is the imaginary character that the gamer has to enact. Embodied presence through this character is challenging, demanding, but satisfying, since the success for the gamer depends on the success of the character (Fine, 1983). Here the personal creation of the objects and the creative manner form the basis of self-extensions. They also help gamers increase their efficacy (Fine, 1983).

As American informants became more experienced, their focus moved towards winning the game rather than on other aspects such as painting. Thus, with experience, informants become more competitive, which can overshadow their need for socializing and the easy-going environment. French counterparts on the other hand were less concerned about winning and more about enjoying the various facets. American gamers were often competitive to satisfy their urge to win the battle, while the French felt less of a sense to win and more of a desire to experience the game itself. Since Warhammer demands more commitment of time and energy than other games, it may cultivate an augmented feeling of competitiveness. To place these differences in an FRPG context, FRP studies highlighted the non-competitive nature of FRPGs, which seems to be more consistent with the French players. FRPGs are considered more of a leisurely activity demanding cooperation (Fine, 1983), which is a distinctive feature from other games.

Finally for American informants, consuming Warhammer enabled them to imagine and create various war scenarios, and different historical periods to thus 'transfer' them back in time. In addition, the figurines created a conduit for the players to enter into a different reality through their fictitious names and physical forms. The French similarly enjoyed the opportunity to escape into another universe, but the emphasis was more on creativity through escapism and the interesting experience. Warhammer enthusiasts' interests paralleled

the interests of other FRP gamers in this respect (Douse and McManus, 1993; Fine, 1983).

Warhammer community: in between postmodernism and poststructuralism

The postmodern approach to consumption has contributed to the renewal of the understanding of consumer collectives by putting into play two closely related concepts: tribes of consumption (Cova and Cova, 2002) and brand communities (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001). Cova and Cova (2002, p. 602) define a consumption tribe as being 'a network of heterogeneous persons – in terms of age, sex, income, etc. – who are linked by a shared passion or emotion; a tribe is capable of collective action, its members are not simple consumers, they are also advocates'. Cova and Cova (2002) also contrast a consumption tribe with a 'segment', defining the latter as 'a group of homogeneous persons – they share the same characteristics – who are not connected to each other; a segment is not capable of collective action, its members are simple consumers' (p. 603). Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001, p. 412) define a brand community as 'a specialized, non-geographic bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand'. In the postmodern approach, consumers are seen as uprooted ('non-geographic') and isolated from previous structures ('heterogeneous persons' who do not 'share the same characteristics') which used to give them stable identities. Rigid categorization based on the political–economic organizational forms of class, gender, and other distinctive categories such as age or geography are replaced by a more complex or organic structure (Maffesoli, 1996) based on shared experience, common ethos and passion.

However, the poststructural approach to consumption argues that whereas postmodernity has brought on fragmentation, this does not mean that master categories such as nation, class, gender, sexual preferences, generation, religion and stage of life are no longer of central importance to the organization of society and consumption. Indeed, Holt (1997) emphasizes the socio-historical context in which all consumer collectives are formed: (1) people can understand and thereby consume the same product or brand in many different ways according to the categories they belong to; (2) consumer collectives are mainly based on a shared interpretation of consumption practices thus indicating that a similar set of cultural frameworks or tastes are applied to the act of consumption. In the same vein, Thompson and Troester (2002) maintain that their results on the natural health microculture, in addition to Holt's findings, suggest that reality may be far less anarchic than is believed by postmodern marketers.

In addition, both the postmodern perspective and poststructuralist theories (especially, Holt, 1997) argue that postmodern consumers have multiple affiliations and divergent consumption patterns. While Maffesoli (1996) and Cova and Cova (2002) view tribes as volatile and independent of societal structure,

Holt (1997) emphasizes how consumer collectives are always connected to a socio-historical context.

The poststructural and the postmodern approaches reach a synthesis through the tribe concept (see Figure 14.2). Postmodernism advocates both a free expression of the self and the return to one's local roots. Among these roots, there is the cultural heritage of a subject drawn from the local society to which he/she belongs. Poststructuralism, on the other hand, considers the cultural heritage as a point of aggregation for individuals that cannot be discarded. Consequently, the postmodern and poststructural approaches share a common ground: the cultural heritage is an origin for the poststructural theory, while it is an aim for the postmodern subject. In order to return to her/his own roots, the subject employs a tribe. This seems to be a postmodern and poststructural move at the same time.

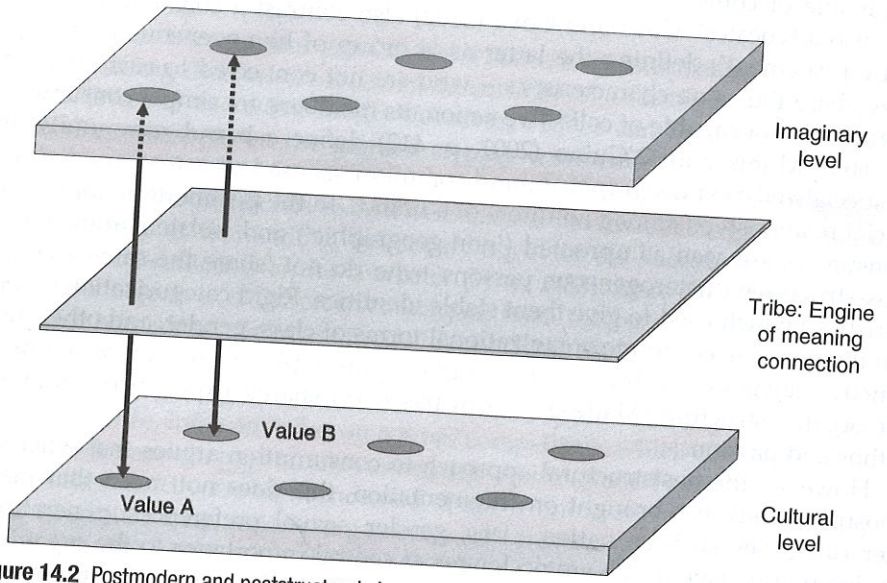

Figure 14.2 Postmodern and poststructural views.

Referring to Figure 14.2, from a poststructural perspective the subjects would move exclusively on the first level, which represents cultural values rooted in society. The subjects' behaviour would be dictated by these values through internalized personality traits and/or external bonding influences. The higher level in the figure represents imagination, which is a system of imaginary values created by the constellation of tribes to which the subject belongs (Cova and Cova, 2002). It is not a realm of fantasies, but a parallel and rich universe often described by literature on communal consumption. This universe has its own rules – sometimes more detailed than 'real' ones – but is freely chosen by subjects. The tribe acts as a connector between the two levels.

Through the tribal rituals (postmodern) one freely chooses to live some cultural facets of his or her society (poststructural). 'Trekkers' (Kozinets, 2001) for

example, draw their core values and utopias (such as universalism, tolerance for variety, spirituality) from the real society discourse (the first level), where these values are real issues, either affirmed or challenged. Then they live these values in the imaginary level of the TV series *Star Trek* through the rituals, language garments and gatherings of the tribe.

Our study of Warhammer enthusiasts in France and the US suggests individuals form bonds with each other based on consumption processes inherent to the game. They resemble a tribe described by Cova (1997), which exemplifies the synthesizing of poststructural and postmodern approaches. The meaning of Warhammer is suspended between the postmodern imaginary level (Cova and Cova, 2002) created by the Warhammer constellation of communities and the rooted structural meanings drawn from the local cultures. The tribal dimension lies in between, which influences the meanings attached to the game. The tribe is the postmodern engine which connects imaginary meanings and cultural meanings, thus giving the subject the poststructural freedom to refer to his or her cultural heritage without being bounded by it.

On the one hand, young and unmarried college graduate males overwhelmingly crowd this tribe. On the other hand, it highlights the co-existence of geographically organized sub-tribes within the Warhammer community that allocate different meanings to the brand according to the culture they belong to. Competitiveness, for instance, distinguishes US and French gamers. Competition is drawn for the local US culture, where this cultural facet is probably more salient than in France. This cultural facet is re-lived in the imaginary level of Warhammer through the ritual of battles at the tribe level. The cultural value of competitiveness is freely picked up by the US subject from his culture and used in the tribe.

The local cultures show similarities and thus the global nature of the Warhammer experience, but at the same time they reflect sufficient differences that create the uniqueness of each culture. Consequently, it may be possible to discern certain logic of cultural consistency with regard to what type of collective affiliations a consumer makes: age, gender, and geography matter for individuals in affiliating to the Warhammer community.

The synthesizing of postmodern and poststructural views also allows us to take into account the evolution that a community commonly undertakes. Individuals are first attracted by the similarities they share with other members, which are not related to the passion of the gaming community. One starts to play chess in a group of chess players, for instance, attracted by peers that do the same, not only by the game itself. Then the community evolves and the profile of individuals achieves a more heterogeneous nature. Once the new entrant develops chess competencies, he/she starts to play with different opponents: older or younger, from the same country or from abroad. A similar evolution is observed in the development of a religious cult, where the cult attracts people by leveraging on the similarities between the group and the potential new entrant. The experienced sense of belonging is often the first step to enter the group. Then the common passion starts to have more relevance. In the Warhammer case, some of the subjects may be new entrants of

how does this fit with "it just hit me"

the group, attracted by the 'structural' commonalities shared with the members in other contexts: same university, same age, or same lifestyle. During later stages however, one can expect that the subject would feel part of the group also with individuals of differing profile. We believe this discussion will serve as a starting point to begin rethinking consumption processes within both postmodern and poststructural approaches.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to examine similarities and differences between Warhammer gaming tribes in the US and France, as well as position our results within postmodern and poststructural approaches to consumption. In doing so, we first examined literature on consumption tribes noting how various approaches define and influence consumption scholarship with notions of community. We then contextualized Warhammer via gaming literature to describe the game's unique traits, which enable complex consumption experiences for enthusiasts. After this discussion, we then presented the results from our comparative analysis between French and US Warhammer gamers' consumption experiences. We finally argued our results situate and synthesize the Warhammer gaming community in between postmodern and poststructural approaches, which suggests a rethinking is needed in terms of describing consumption experiences.

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