

Ludic Agency and Retail Spectacle

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Spectacular, themed environments have been theorized as places where play is limited and consumer agency is overpowered. In a multiperspectival ethnographic engagement with ESPN Zone Chicago, we find consumers resisting the rules, but only to a limited degree. Spectacular consumption possesses a do-it-yourself quality unrecognized in prior theory. Technology and screens are important to this form of play, which exhibits a transcendent character built of liminoid elements and consumer fantasy. Yet, even in ostensibly overpowering spectacular consumption environments, consumption still is negotiated dialectically; consumer and producer interests are embedded in one another in a process of "interagency."

Spectacles have a long history of being viewed as ways that marketers could bombard and overwhelm consumers in contemporary commercial society. Building on post-modern and situationist theorizing, Firat and Venkatesh (1995) emphasize the ability of marketers to use spectacle to overwhelm consumers. Indeed, they place the production of spectacle at the very center of marketing and spectacular consumption as the quintessence of consumer culture and contemporary society. In so doing, Firat and Venkatesh (1995) follow Debord's (1995) classic theorization, arguing that consumers are largely overpowered by intense and hyperreal media depictions—although they still hold out the possibility for consumers' subversion of and liberation from the spectacle's dazzling market logics.

Shortly thereafter, consumer researchers began increasingly to acknowledge the theoretical importance—and the

cocreative role of the consumer—in spectacular built environments. In simultaneous (although unrelated) autoethnographic studies of the same retail environment—Nike Town Chicago—Sherry (1998) and Peñaloza (1999) inaugurated a stream of research into servicescapes that explored the contours of spectacle at flagship brand stores. Consumer agency in this setting was construed as dialectical rather than dichotomous. While the emphasis in each study was on the marketer's shaping of consumer experience, consumer accommodation and resistance in the cocreation of performance was documented.

While these pioneering studies were insightful, they imparted a limited, broad-brush sense of how consumers behave in a spectacular environment. Ludic behavior in these locations was registered but neither detailed nor theorized. Studying Las Vegas, Belk (2000) proposed the importance of liminal characteristics and play to spectacular consumption. Belk's interpretation of ludic dynamics focuses on the spectacular marketer's infantilization of the consumer; while he believes regression and playfulness to be fundamentally good impulses, he chronicles the way in which marketers channel consumer playfulness to produce more avid gamblers.

In some of the most recent and influential work on themed retail and spectacle, Gottdiener (1997, 2000) and Ritzer (1999) again return to prior conceptions of massive marketer orchestration in these environments that has the effect of bombarding, overwhelming, and coercing consumers. Using themed sites to emphasize the link between cultural and economic realms, Gottdiener (1997, p. 75) analyzes spectacular retail environments as places that provide "enter-

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tainment while stimulating the transformation of individuals to commodity-craving selves.” One of the most important ways that this is accomplished is through the “commercial control of consumer fantasies” occurring as a result of the exercise of massive media and entertainment power (Gottdiener 1997, p. 155). Emphasizing the use of advanced technology to watch and constrain consumers, Ritzer (1999, pp. 87–93) compares spectacular consumption environments to institutions, Weberian iron cages, and prisons—one of his central metaphors is Foucault’s (1977) panopticon, the oppressive observation booths that can bring about an orderly, disciplinary society in prisons.

Extant theory regarding spectacular consumption therefore offers mixed answers to questions of consumer agency. Although scholars seem to agree that spectacular environments have important effects on consumer agency, these effects range from an almost prison-like constraint of consumer options to accommodation and resistance, from annexation and commercial colonization of consumers’ fantasy lives to a playful coercion of consumer compliance. The important and growing role that information technologies and screens play in relation to these themes is mentioned, but underanalyzed. As these spectacular environments become more complex and interactive, incorporating more technology and more interactivity, it is important that our theorizing follow by tracking the mutual imbrication of place, play, technology, and self.

To inform our understanding of these important sites of consumption and their effects on consumer agency, we deliver in this article a situated account of spectacular consumption located in a complex, cutting-edge themed retail environment. We begin with a discussion of theory on playful consumption and consumer agency and relate these concepts to the consumption of spectacular environments. We then describe the methods used in our field study. Attending carefully to the notions of play and technology evident within this environment, we present our ethnographic findings. We find that screens and screen play have noteworthy effects. Delving into prior notions that link liminoid space and states with spectacular consumption, we find the importance of constructions of reality that are mediated by technological apparatuses and mass media images. Developing Ritzer’s (1999) use of the panopticon analogy, we devise an alternative interpretation of spectacular environments as obverse panopticons in which surveillance is not oppressive but actually desired and libidinally charged. Our conclusion details a theoretical posture of interagency, in which consumer-marketer relations in these environments must be seen as complex and dialectical processes of tactical moves and countermoves.

PLAY, AGENCY, AND SPECTACLE

Playful or Ludic Consumption

Two decades ago, Holbrook et al. (1984) encouraged our field to pursue inquiry into play, with little apparent effect. Holbrook et al. (1984, pp. 728–29) defined play as an “in-

trinsically motivated consumer behavior” undertaken for its own sake, such as hobbies, leisure activities, creativity, games, sports, and aesthetic appreciation. They found satisfaction, enjoyment, fun, and other internal, affective, and hedonic elements to be “the essence of play and other leisure activities” (Holbrook et al. 1984, p. 729). Over a decade later, Holbrook (1994) proposed play’s three key dimensions: it is intrinsically motivating, self-oriented, and active. Drawing on Holbrook’s work, Holt’s (1995) consumption typology yielded a conceptualization of “consuming as play” as a form of autotelic interconsumer interaction in which a “consumption object is essential” to the communing and socializing activities of spectators (Holt 1995, p. 9).

In another typologically oriented investigation, Deighton and Grayson (1995) emphasized the construction and following of rules as they explored the nature of playful consumption as an element in consumer seduction. Because using a social frame of play “redefines interactions in benign, capricious or less instrumental terms,” marketers may use this frame to manipulate, seduce, and even victimize consumers (Deighton and Grayson 1995, p. 667). Following on this proposition, Grayson (1999), in perhaps the most detailed theorization of play and consumption yet, suggests that the rule-bound nature of play offers consumers paradoxical opportunities to be seduced or be subversive through rule following or rule breaking, playing along versus playing around. Through an understanding of consumer play, the marketer is recast as the archetypal Trickster, both entertaining and dangerous (Grayson 1999).

Linking Play and Agency

We take as our starting point Murray’s (2002, p. 439) admonishment that “future interpretive research in consumer studies needs to embrace the dialectical interplay between agency and structure,” which he expresses as a dualistic tension between “sign experimentation”—the creative capacity of consumer—and “sign domination”—the structural ways consumers are dominated by producers. We also take Firat and Venkatesh’s (1995, p. 260) suggestion that future research should examine the extent to which consumers, rather than producers, marketers, or “the market,” control their own reality. In the richness of spectacular environments—which appear to be increasingly incorporating our entertainment, retail, and even civic engagements (see Jansson 2002; Kellner 2003)—this undertaking requires a more sophisticated and nuanced notion of agency than the “pacing” concept set forth by Deighton (1992).

In their development of the liberatory postmodern stance, Firat and Venkatesh (1995) emphasize the need for an understanding of consumer agency by linking it to their theorization of spectacle and media power. The key is control of ontology, of the construction of social reality. They propound that marketers determine consumers’ definitions of reality through control of the media and spectacles: “the spectacle circumscribes reality” (Firat and Venkatesh 1995, p. 251). As Debord (1995) argued, spectacle replaces reality (consumers’ real lives) with a false image, thus fal-

sifying reality and deceiving consumers who can no longer tell truth (their real identities) from fiction. Yet consumers find freedom or emancipation in reflexively—perhaps even playfully—subverting market signs in favor of meanings that are more expressive of their individual identities: “the consumer finds his/her liberatory potential in subverting the market rather than being seduced by it” (Firat and Venkatesh 1995, p. 251).

Critical and Celebratory Views of Consumer Agency. Firat and Venkatesh’s (1995) influential and fascinating theorizations hybridize two positions on consumer agency that seek to answer questions about who ultimately determines the freedom consumers have to make choices—producers or consumers. An early, dogmatic, Marxist, Frankfurt School and situationist inspired view—which we term the “critical view”—assumes that consumers are largely unaware, irrational, passive, and emotional, a blindly conformist mass easily duped by the mass media (see, e.g., Hetrick and Lozada 1994). The interests of consumers and producers are generally viewed from this perspective as a nonintersecting dichotomy.

As with most dichotomous issues, questions of consumer agency have been most satisfyingly addressed by proposing a middle-ground answer, which we term the “celebratory view.” These theories and studies state that consumers assert their agency over marketer-determined identities, practices, and meanings by formulating “creative,” subversive, idiosyncratic, communally relevant, or resistant alternatives, or by rejecting marketing impositions outright (see, e.g., Scott 1994, pp. 465–66, 477). Consumers and producers negotiate and coconstruct flexible, polysemic, and emergent identities, meanings, and practices; consumer and producer interests often intersect; both sets of interests are simultaneously served; and no one is dominated. The producer-consumer relationship is not diabolical, but dialectical. Although this perspective is intrinsically appealing, many scholars continue to assert the social activist value of the critical view. They continue to investigate whether and to what extent producers exercise their massive marketing power, in particular social environments, in certain circumstances, and among some groups and individuals, to overwhelm their agency and constrain their freedoms.

Theorizing the Link among Play, Agency, Spectacle, and Ontology. Conceptualizations of play as simultaneously seductive and subversive suggest its centrality to our understanding of consumer agency. The self-expressive notions of consumer emancipation and subversion as well as the “nonlinearities of thought and practice,” “improbable behaviors,” and “discontinuities” of Firat and Venkatesh (1995, p. 255) seem related both to the “paidic” subversive and innovative playful behavior described by Grayson (1999, pp. 115–17) and to the ontological notions of the social construction of reality. The liminoid (Turner 1974), world building, creative, and playful self-expressiveness of subculture and community members has similarly been linked to consumer emancipation and resistance to manip-

ulative corporations and media marketing spectacles (Belk and Costa 1998; Kozinets 2001, 2002), but this relationship has yet to be explored systematically.

Therefore, this postmodern stance opens up a range of interesting research questions that probe the link among media spectacles, playful behavior, the ontology of reality creation, and consumer agency. Does play actually subvert media spectacle as consumers assert their agency by playing around with it, and under what conditions does this happen? Or is consumer play mostly scripted by the directions of the spectacle producer, as consumers surrender agency in order to play along with the game? How is consumer play encouraged and constrained by producers? What is the role of the sense of reality? How does the use of technology affect this? In our progression toward a refined reconceptualization of consumer agency and spectacle, this article offers notions of screen play, obverse panopticons, and interagency as answers that transcend critical and celebratory views to reveal how very deeply intertwined are the viewpoints, interests, and constructions of consumers and producers.

METHOD

Kellner (2003, pp. 2, 65, 67) recognizes the “sports entertainment colossus” as a particularly potent form of media spectacle that should be regarded as a primal form of television programming, since immediacy, action, and drama are built into the activity already, and all evoke both active and passive responses in spectators. Because sports spectacle is the center of an “almost religious fetishism” (Kellner 2003, p. 69), it exerts a nearly irresistible influence on participants. Our project is grounded in an intensive 14-mo. immersion in ESPN Zone Chicago—one of the most recent and elaborate themed retail environments ever designed. ESPN Zone Chicago is one of a chain of 35,000-foot entertainment and dining complexes, themed around the world’s leading cable sports network, ESPN (Entertainment and Sports Programming Network). The ESPN Zone locations contain areas dedicated to dining, drinking, viewing sports, and playing both physical and virtual games. The built environment accords well with recent research on service-scapes (Sherry 1998) and themed environments (Gottdiener 2000; Ritzer 1999) and is of theoretical interest for the diverse and high-tech manner in which consumers are extended opportunities to play. It is developed and operated by the Disney Company, the \$19 billion a year entertainment conglomerate.

The traditional ethnographic year allowed us to sample a wide variety of patrons and consumption offerings. In addition to customers, we included management and staff in the investigation. We made full use of a standard battery of ethnographic techniques: participant observation, individual and group interviews, and photography. We recorded our data in field notes, audio tapes, and photographs. We collected artifacts for analysis. Interviews were conducted both on- and off-site and ranged anywhere between 15 min. and 2.5 hr., depending on circumstance. Our interpretation is

grounded in interviews with several hundred consumers, and in encounters with well over 1,000.

Our research team was recruited to ensure a comprehensive and nuanced examination of the dynamics of the field site. To that end, we fielded a multicultural team composed of three women and three men, ranging in age from their early twenties to late forties, for our data collection, interpretation, and analysis. Team members coded field notes on a regular basis, identifying themes in observations and interview transcripts, and shared the emics and etics of their efforts with one another during strategy meetings. Lists of themes (e.g., gender, embodiment, regression, fragmentation, carnality, virtuality, telepresence, agency, branding, co-creation, resistance, nostalgia, theater, *communitas*, etc.) were developed, supported, and contested with data and were winnowed and refined by additional investigation as group consensus emerged. Further, lists of contextual and interpretive literatures (e.g., place, spectacle, play, sport, tourism, celebrity, utopia mass mediation, etc.) were generated as the study progressed and were explored by team members as analysis warranted. In the *Odyssey* tradition of team-based multisite ethnography (Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988), we tacked constantly between library and field as the project unfolded, striving to braid the strands of inquiry together as our insight deepened.

Because we built our team on the principle of perspectival diversity, we expected a considerable amount of negotiation in return for greater holism. This certainly proved to be the case. For example, non-American teammates heightened our interaction with tourists, jocks were able to take us into the heart of deep sports play, and our differently gendered perspectives returned us relentlessly to the cultural construction of masculinity (for more on this topic, see Sherry et al. 2004). We represent our work in a unified voice simply for purposes of clarity in exposition.

Over the course of our inquiry we were observant participators. That is, we made a concerted effort to have the kinds of experiences the field site afforded, so we would embody touchstones of our informants' lived experiences. This use of obtrusive and unobtrusive inquiry gave us many opportunities for triangulation across methods, consumers, incidents, and inquirers. It also gave us an emotional and sensual feel for the issues of agency that we were coming to understand intellectually. These data are reflected in our inclusion of observational data extracted from field-note excerpts. We now turn to a discussion of the findings.

FINDINGS

Entering the World of the Zone

We begin our journey into ESPN Zone Chicago and its two central playgrounds, by seeing it through the eyes of "Steve."¹ Steve is a 27-yr.-old white male business professional, sports fan, and Chicago native. In an interview, Steve

interprets his reaction to the entryway of ESPN Zone Chicago.

The ESPN [logo] is the [sign of] sports. And then what else could you do to try and get more attention there, you know? Black, White, Yellow, Red, Green. And you know it's the biggest thing in that whole front of the building. It's the biggest thing there! It's bigger than the doors. It's bigger than any of the windows. You walk into there and you know you're just going to be walking into a different world—whatever it is! And it looks like all of those huge theme tourist attractions. You know, if you were walking by and you had never heard of it before, I think you would walk by and you would say this is a "Hard Rock Cafe, Planet Hollywood, Rainforest Cafe, with a sports theme." . . . I mean it jumps out at you. Look at all those colors and the fact that it's fires and flame! It looks like [they are saying], "We're going to overwhelm you with the sports theme."

Steve's narrative informs us about how the visual, architectural cues of largeness and bright colors combine with particular icons to provide him with the promise of a themed environment. He states that the visual language of the building's design is instantly decodable. "Everything there means masculine, it means sport. The metal stairs, the red ticker, you just feel like 'Oh my God. This place is huge. It's *all* sports!' It just grabs you" (Steve, interview). Repeatedly in his account, Steve relates the themed environment of ESPN Zone Chicago to themes of masculinity and sports central to his identity. "You walk in, and I am like, OK, this is really cool. Wow, this is awesome! [pause] Just because you have sports all around you, everything means sports. The lights up top you look like you're at a stadium with the sky above you. Everything is sports colors. You know, the walls and the pillars there are all the colors there of basketball floors." Masculine meanings are also conveyed by his reference to fire and flames. Hugeness, the visual, and awe are also combined in his account with the sense of being overwhelmed by size and color. The specific icons that he mentions direct his awe in a sports-specific manner, a manner enculturated through his life by a commercial culture based on the almost-ubiquitous intertwining of entertainment and identity. The place is apparently "really cool" and "awesome" because it is like stepping into a scene based on the sights he loves to see on media screens.

In his narrative, above, Steve interpreted this physical environment as having a worldlike quality: "you know you're just going to be walking into a different world" (Steve). The huge green hemisphere ESPN Zone corporate logo; the prevalence of circles, globes, and curved and arced spaces; the name "Zone"; and the high and sky-painted ceiling (replete with heavenly clouds) all may signal to consumers the liminal or liminoid (Turner 1974) status of ESPN Zone Chicago as a world apart. Steve's relating these cues to themed restaurants—"Hard Rock Cafe, Planet Hollywood, Rainforest Cafe"—suggests that the spectacular themed environment also may possess this otherworldly qual-

¹Pseudonyms are used throughout this article to protect informant confidentiality.

ity, in which gigantic signs, hemispheres, and bright colors portend the presence of portals leading away from everyday experiences into created worlds of consumer fantasy based on entertainment themes, properties, and images.

The description of ESPN Zone Chicago as “overwhelming” ranks as one of the most common comments we hear in our interviews. However, the response to being overwhelmed differs. In his interview, Steve holds out the prospect of being overwhelmed by sports as a positive notion. The sign promises him satiation and fulfillment—it says, “We’re going to overwhelm you with the sports theme” (Steve, interview). Later in his interview, Steve elaborates on the overwhelming qualities of the place: “If I go there, I leave there with just a rush of adrenaline. You know, ‘God, it was loud! I was pumped up watching the games.’ And it makes the game more exciting.”

When we asked several informants for elaboration on their response that the place was overwhelming, they seemed perplexed. Informants said things like “I like the sports stuff” (which is why they are attracted to being here), but they can find it “a bit much.” Others said things to the effect that the noise and overwhelming visuals were “good in small doses, but hard to take for very long.” There was a feeling of excess, an abundance of sensory overload that was energizing but also taxed the mind and body—a combination of positive and negative. As ethnographers, we had varying reactions to the place, ranging from total engagement to absolute disgust. Illustrating the latter perspective, consider the following journal excerpt that adopts a much more critical perspective on the overwhelming qualities of the ESPN Zone Chicago entrance and experience.

That entry notes that, on walking into ESPN Zone Chicago, “I feel like I’m stepping into a giant TV screen. Instead of actively ‘sucking out the marrow of life,’ I feel that I’m being sucked into a black hole, where everything just turns and turns around me. An inferno of darkness, television, noise, games, food—and people. We are given no reason to go anywhere else: ‘Eat. Drink. Watch. Play. What more do you need?’ It troubles me that I feel like I’m being persuaded to be *there*, *instead of here*. As if, under the promise and excuse of interactivity and innocent playfulness, I am accepting spectatorship and couch potatiness.”

While Steve is delighted by the prospect of being inundated and overwhelmed by television screens broadcasting sports, one of us is horrified at the prospect of entering into a gigantic television screen. What Steve finds a tempting sports-oriented self-actualization experience, we can find repulsive, a type of endless confusion, a forceful confining combined with deceptive persuasion. An ethnographer with little identification with masculinity or sport, this person seeks their own inner space (“here”), rather than the themed space of ESPN Zone (which is termed “there”). This person is given promises of interactivity that have no resonance and no basis in their actual experience. The ethnographer constructs the space as ideological and mendacious, a persuasive force, and—exercising immediate and considerable agency—resists it.

The Arena

One of the most theoretically intriguing areas within ESPN Zone Chicago is the large (approximately 10,000 sq. ft.) area that Disney management terms “the Sports Arena” (see fig. 1). As we described it in Sherry et al. (2001, p. 488), the Sports Arena is filled with a wide selection of sports-themed video games.

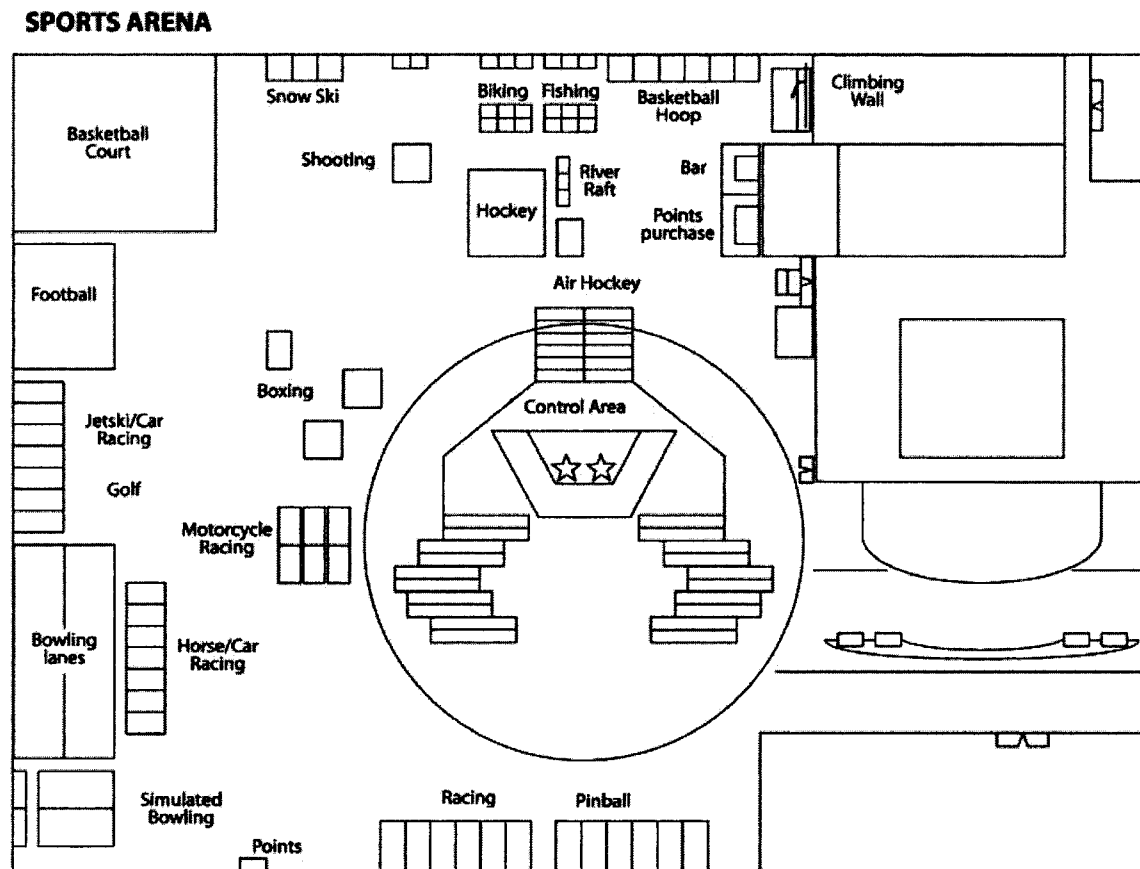
The Arena provides an array of games. First are virtual games like golf, fishing, car racing, boat racing, motorcycle racing, skiboarding, skateboarding, and jet skiing. Next are more “realistic” games like the shooting of hockey pucks into a hockey net, miniature bowling and one-on-one basketball played on a scaled-down court. Finally, there are hybrids such as shooting a real soccer ball against a virtual goaltender, climbing on the moving surface of a simulated rock face, or skydiving wearing a pair of virtual goggles at The Drop. The videogames often have “realistic” input components, such as a fishing rod for the fishing game (rather than buttons or a joystick), a motorcycle body or a horse to sit upon for the racing game. For those not playing, there is a lot to watch, for each videogame offers a [large] video [screen] to monitor the fast-moving feast of images that invite spectatorship.

The Reality of Screen Play in the Sports Arena. We will describe and analyze the ludic consumption of several of these video games (and their spectatorship) in this section. We begin by detailing the interview responses of “Alexander,” a white male informant in his early twenties. We observed Alexander playing a computerized bowling game that offered a technological alteration of sports reality by offering impossible situations in which to bowl, including on the deck of a turbulently tossing ship. Using much body language and gesticulation, Alexander recollected his experience:

You have this huge screen and when the boat started tilting—you were probably adjusting your feet and rolling the ball [his hands paddle against the (imaginary) rolling ball, simulating playing the video game] against it and trying to prevent the ship from tilting—but you know it’s not tilting. You know what I mean? But you’re going on, fighting against it, fighting against it [tilting as he speaks]. You’re leaning to the left, and you’re pushing to go the opposite way—when odds are you could probably stand straight up and bowl the same way. It’s all about postures and attitudes. Nobody was just standing. . . . [It is] very physical. And all those games, I think that was the great part about it.

In Alexander’s comments on physicality, we discover the ambivalence that makes play possible. The suspension of disbelief and creation of a separate and self-contained world are universal elements of play (Huizinga 1955). By stating that he could probably bowl just as well standing up, Alexander implies that, although he knows that what he is seeing on the video game screen is not truly happening, his

FIGURE 1
PHYSICAL CONFIGURATION OF THE SPORTS ARENA, ESPN ZONE CHICAGO



body responds, his mind is deceived—and because this is play, he allows it to be deceived. He seems to appreciate the success of the illusion. What is apparently great about the game for Alexander is the sense of exertion he is forced to exude in competition, the fight to win, and the truth of the struggle. This aggressive form of play, which Alexander emphasizes as a fight filled with physical exertion, is a hallmark of masculine sports play, with its strength, physicality, and intolerance of weakness (Messner 1992). Struggling for control while simultaneously surrendering it, knowing the game is unreal but reveling in its apparent reality, he demonstrates the sophisticated sense of agency and ontology that he enjoys consuming as part of the game.

“Jack,” a white, urban male patron of ESPN Zone Chicago who is in his early thirties, describes how he experiences game play in the Arena:

Adrenaline rush. Not only are you trying to do well, but you’re trying to outdo your friend at the same time. It’s almost, too, like you’re in the game. It doesn’t feel like “Oh, I am in a bar, I’m playing a game,” but almost like “OK, I’m on the field and there’s my receiver I’ve got to hit him with a pass” kinda thing. You know? It’s not the full effect,

obviously, but it gives you a little bit of a taste of that. I think just the setup, the sound you hear with sports broadcasts all around you [pause]. You know, you almost feel like you’re in a stadium or something. The fact that you are physically touching a football or basketball. So you are feeling it, and you associate that touching a football or basketball with participating in a sport that you’ve done before. So they’re pretty much, it’s almost like they’re transporting you from a bar into an actual competitive situation like in the field or in the hockey rink or a place like that.

We can consider Jack’s account in light of Alexander’s embodied-virtual transference and Steve’s earlier reference to entering ESPN Zone Chicago as “walking into a different world.” Jack’s account merges different senses of reality, as fantasy and reality in some sense become malleable concepts that serve his sense of identity. The sounds of broadcast sports, the kinesthetic feedback, and the physical nature of the game task drive the excitement and energy of his competition. Together, these factors seem to reinforce Jack’s conception of himself as comfortably positioned somewhere between what might conventionally be termed reality and

fantasy: "I'm on the field. . . . It's not the full effect, obviously" (interview). You are in "a different world" (Steve), the video experience is "very physical" (Alexander), and "you're in a stadium" (Jack): these informants suggest that the hundreds of television screens, video monitors, and virtual reality-type games place ESPN Zone Chicago on a borderland between realities—virtual and embodied, everyday reality and fantasy.

Consider next the Sport Arena experiences we noted of a pair of brothers. Eric (white, male, early twenties) watches his brother Jeremy (white, male, 13 yr. of age) dangle from the Sky Drop—the hang glide simulator. As an avid sportsman, Eric enjoys the discomfiture of his younger brother, who is an outdoorsman with no empathy for sport, per se. Jeremy's body English grows increasingly amusing to Eric, who laughs as his younger brother flails legs and yanks vigorously on the arm straps to control his virtual descent. Jeremy is unable to match his physical movements to the virtual feedback he receives on his helmet visor, and the crowd gathering around the game watches the external video monitor, calling advice, to his brother's further delight. Relinquishing his helmet to the operator upon virtually landing, Jeremy confides to his brother, "The drop off is really cool! It really feels like you're dropping. . . . But it's hard to control."

Our observations of the brothers demonstrate how video game arena play is focused on the visual sense, but its effects are experienced as profoundly embodied. The tension between his visual sense and proprioception is especially acute because the play of his eyes across the video game screen fools Jeremy's inner ear into responding. The realism of the depiction and the physical nature of the interface combine with the sense of competition. The brothers wander to the bass fishing game, where Jeremy—an enthusiastic fisherman—wields the electronic fishing rod with great vigor. Grimacing, whipping, and jerking the pole, and yelling at the fish, Jeremy is able to exert more control in this particular game, as his literal skill set—including muscle memory and ritual repertoire—translates to the virtual from real-life experience. His brother goads him into another virtual ride, this time the horse race. Jeremy mounts the mechanical thoroughbred, rivets his gaze on the game monitor, and simulates his notion of a jockey. His physical effort is intense as he responds to the information on the screen. He is visibly tired upon dismounting. As with Alexander's emphasis on the physicality of virtual bowling, significant exertion is a crucial response to ESPN Zone Chicago's video games, a criteria for judging realism.

Playing with Media Reality. As a concession to his younger brother's willingness to play what he terms a "real sport," Eric follows Jeremy to the electronic skeet shooting game to continue their outing. We catch the brothers after another hour or so of activity. Eric raves about the football passing game he has played, stressing the fun of the physical challenge and the enjoyment he derived from the game's resemblance to the NFL Quarterback Challenge that he's "seen on TV." The need for a video game sport that is

realistic—that is, bodily physical and requiring exertion, again seems relevant. Alexander and Jack mention it. Jeremy also comments about it in reference to his hang gliding simulator experience. This combination of media reality and themed experience is highlighted in the following section.

The brothers then meander to a virtual soccer game, where they take turns scoring on a virtual goalie, each pausing to yell "Goooooool" in imitation of Andres Cantor, their favorite Spanish-language television announcer. This behavior suggests the central role of sports announcers in the brothers' play experience, as a famous announcer is channeled in the brothers' victorious yell. The pair then strolls to the basketball court, where they queue for their turn, listening to other participants "trash talking" prior to taking the court (i.e., disparaging opponents' skills in a form of competitive verbal dueling: e.g., "You suck, I can't believe you want to lose to me") and watching current players on the closed circuit monitor attempting to beat the buzzer with jump shots. They comment on the posted scores of professional athletes such as Michael Jordan, Scottie Pippen, Steve Kerr, Kobe Bryant, and Anfernee Hardaway, and they wonder aloud whether these sports heroes have actually played on this court. After their experiences, they said that they were satisfied with ESPN Zone Chicago and, although they found the games to be a bit pricey, would like to return.

The exploits of Jeremy and Eric further reveal the ontological tension already noted by other informants. The brothers discuss whether the skydiving seems real enough, they discuss which sports games are more or less real, and they speculate whether celebrities were or were not really there. This ontological tension is not unexpected, for at ESPN Zone Chicago, even gravity can be simulated. In this excerpt, the brothers note and discuss sports icons such as Jordan. The presence of these larger-than-life media icons seems integral to the brothers' consumption of sports play. Televisuality, or telemediation, encourages consumers to identify with celebrity athletes and broadcasters as games are played, replayed, reenacted, staged, and watched in the Arena. These sports figures are almost palpable presences presiding over these reenactments. A reverence for history at one end of the spectrum, or for celebrity iconicity—or the pseudoevent (Boorstin 1961)—on the other, is alive at the site, suggesting the powerful and influential role of the mass media in creating and maintaining the fantasies on which this place is built. Even more than concrete and steel, media fantasies form the foundation of this structure.

Being-in-the-Game in the Sports Arena. Emphasizing watching and being watched, on screens and on playing fields, the field-note excerpt also illustrates the dramaturgical interplay of performers and audience, or players and spectators, at ESPN Zone Chicago. The brothers Jeremy and Eric repeatedly compared their Arena performances to those of celebrity athletes and narrated them like their favorite sportscasters. A crowd had gathered around Jeremy when he played the Sky Drop hang gliding simulation. They watched him, watched his external video monitor, and called advice to him. Thirteen-year-old Jeremy became the center

of a gathered audience's attention. The video game became the stage of the simulated sports arena, and virtual diver Jeremy became the star, the athlete, and a (very) local celebrity.

A pleasurable playful sense of being-in-the-televi-sed-game was found among a number of informants. For "Casandra," a 20-yr.-old, white female sports fan, being-in-the-game manifested fantasies she confided were triggered by the vast atrium entrance of ESPN Zone Chicago, where she imagined that she was on an Olympic sports podium about to receive a medal (see Sherry et al. 2001). In the ESPN Zone Chicago restaurant, an elevated broadcast desk sits, and it is identical to that on the popular ESPN Sports Center show. On many occasions, we observed consumers sitting behind the desk and using this desk as a stage, a place of performance. Some of them would "ham it up" with impersonations and comments on sports celebrities and broadcasters. After watching one set of informants perform behind the desk, we asked them about their impressions. They replied that they enjoyed pretending they were sportscasters performing in the spotlight and enjoyed the reaction they received from others at ESPN Zone Chicago. These are important examples of ludic consumption in which consumers not only "play along" with the sports fantasy games in a way that seems suggested by the built environment but also play—in the sense of informal performing—for one another. Our next section provides examples of more subversive forms of consumer play in this area.

Resistant Consumption Practices in the Sports Arena. Our field notes provide a range of examples to suggest that subversive (re)appropriation of game play was also in evidence in the Arena. For example, skeet shooters often become virtual snipers, shifting their scopes from designated targets and training their sights on wandering patrons, who are oblivious to being stalked. Some observers will notice the snipers. We saw several instances in which a sniper was pointed out to friends, who laughed and enjoyed the strange spectacle. Rebounders on the basketball court sometime reverse their roles, taking the game to an unsuspecting but quickly complicit shooter—audiences almost always gather to watch the intense competition unfolding on this small basketball court. Linked motocrossers will crash into competitors and obstacles for the sheer joy of carnage, sparking competitive rounds of mayhem and gathering audiences of their own. In these instances, the unreality of the games serves as the source of amusing possibilities, as guns are used for mock killing rather than target practice, race cars are deliberately trashed without risk of injury, and, perhaps most significantly, audience members are turned into players. As beer and drinks are served in all areas of ESPN Zone Chicago, consumers also seem to relish combining alcohol drinking with virtual activities such as driving, boating, biking, sky diving, white-water kayaking, and other death-defying feats.

In these resistant practices—from seeking to defy societal conventions like murder and drunk driving to delighting in violence and the carnage of collision—a sense of consumer

control seems to be asserted as the game space is subverted and creatively appropriated. This control seems to manifest through assertions of the unreality of the game, a flouting of the game's reality. The sniping and car destruction, in fact, indicate that the rules of amusement are altered by consumers. This is not "playing around" with the games' rules rather than "playing along" with them (Grayson 1999). It is a metagame with new rules, created by consumers who produce the entertainment experience for other consumers who consume the enacted spectacle of ESPN Zone Chicago. However, these apparent subversions are permitted by the game play (and, likely, management) and encouraged by the masculine sense of gender identity perpetuated in sport (Baker and Boyd 1997; Messner 1992). It is even more critical to note that very little resistance to ESPN Zone Chicago, its ethos, the media spectacle, or the social system in which these are embedded is directly in evidence. In fact, these apparent subversions evidence exactly the same high-risk, ultracompetitive, drunken, and often violent ethos of mainstream U.S. media fare—critiques often levied at male U.S. sports culture in general (Rose and Friedman 1997).

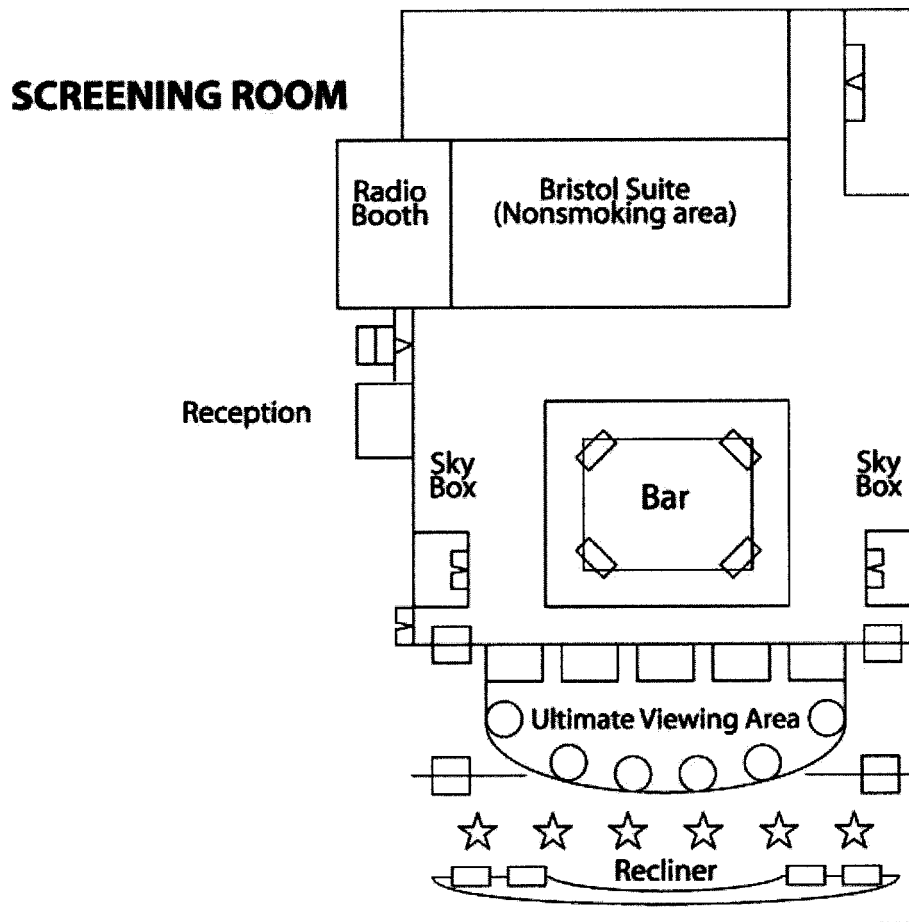
The Screening Room

The Screening Room is a large sports viewing area featuring a single 192 sq. ft. television screen surrounded by 12 smaller 37-in. screens (see fig. 2). There are also dozens of digitized sports information boards. Many of these boards feature ticker-like displays of sports facts and incoming statistics. Tiers behind this row of seats consist of a scarce allotment of tables and booths, each complete with private video and audio feeds to allow selective narrowcasting of games. A bar with seating and a separate restaurant area are located in the areas farthest from the screens. Seating in the front row of this wall of screens—what Disney management has termed "the Throne Zone"—is exclusive. The seats in the Throne Zone are eight large, plush La-Z-Boy-type leather recliners with built-in sound systems wired to armrest remote controls. Weekend waiting times to get into the room can stretch to 4 hr., with seat occupancy an unreachable goal for most during important games.

Screening Room atmospherics feature a terraced, downward-sloping design that one informant compares with a "sports-book in Vegas" (Steve, interview). While sitting on the corner of his father's Throne Zone chair, "Bernie," a 14-yr.-old white male tourist from Virginia, described the screening room: "It's like a movie theater, but it's with sports. . . . It's got all your highlights. It's like having thirty TVs in one room." The enormity of the central screen reinforces Steve and Bernie's interpretations of the space as Vegas sports book and movie theater, as do observations of the dim lighting and the velvet-roped barriers. These consumers read this space as one in which they are to be seated, with their attention centered on a common, large screen, or set of screens. Contrasted with the more active, proprioceptive play in the Sports Arena, play in the Throne Zone centers around consumers' gaze, encouraging a type of immobile watching.

FIGURE 2

PHYSICAL CONFIGURATION OF THE SCREENING ROOM, ESPN ZONE CHICAGO



Being-in-the-Game in the Throne Zone. “What’s attractive about it to me is it is sort of the best of both worlds. You know you get to feel like you’re in the ballpark. It’s loud. It’s crazy. It’s noisy. And you can separate yourself from that. You can kick back in the Throne Zone. It’s a reclining chair, and you can definitely hear whatever you want to hear because the speakers are right at your head. They have a little table that sort of slides around next to it so you can eat your dinner. . . . It’s just you” (Steve, interview). In his comments, Steve indicates his sense of playing within the different realities offered in the Throne Zone. He describes how the place offers “the best of both worlds” by transporting him to the loud, stimulating world of the ballpark but also offering him solitude (“It’s just you”) and comfort (“kick back” in a “reclining chair”).

“You get that feeling like, you know, you’re at the ballpark with all the noise and everything. But you’re just totally on your own, your phone can’t ring, your wife can’t come home and say ‘let’s go do this,’ you’re just there, you’ve got nothing else going on, you’re just inundated with sports

so there is sort of a calming aspect to that. It’s so crazy. You sort of feel like you’re removed from the real world, almost like you do when you go to a ballpark, then you leave there and it’s like, ‘OK, back to reality’” (Steve, interview). In his interview, Steve suggests a liberatory feeling he gets from escaping what he terms “the real world” (i.e., a world rife with demands from boss and spouse): “your phone can’t ring, your wife can’t come home and say ‘let’s go do this.’” The embodied, spatial, complex, overwhelming, “inundating,” and worldlike qualities of being at an actual sports event are present in its simulation so much so that Steve finds it feels like a form of transportation or removal from a particular reality to another reality, a more pleasant fantasy reality from which he must later return: “OK, back to reality.”

“Silvio,” a white male in his late thirties describes his experience in the Throne Zone chairs as, “This is kind of a different experience. . . this gives you a great opportunity to be in the game. I mean to be completely immersed in the game as if you were sitting on your own couch. . .

even though you have other things going on, they won't necessarily detract from the game" (interview). Like Steve, Silvio interprets his experience in the Throne Zone as one of active isolation and total immersion in the game: he feels utterly surrounded by the sports. Steve calls the exclusivity of this overwhelming experience that of a guy who has "only got the TV," sitting on top of the television and having "sports rammed down your throat" (interview).

Yet consider the impressions of "Chad," a white male tourist in his early twenties: "The place is sort of dizzying. You really have to concentrate to take it all in. Sometimes when I sit here [in the Screening Room] I feel like I can't move. Like, I have to put all my attention towards watching the games" (Chad). Despite Steve and Silvio's ascriptions of liberating sensations to it, the experience is construed by Chad as constricting. Chad does not revel in the sensation of being overwhelmed but is dizzied and immobilized by it. It seems to demand too much of him. Perhaps used to what Altman (1986, p. 42) calls the "household flow" of domestic television viewing that competes with attention lapses, domestic duties, and social interactions, he is unused to the intensity of this new, more cinematic, and distraction-free sensation of sports spectatorship. One of the first things we noticed at ESPN Zone Chicago (subsequently confirmed by observations of literally hundreds of consumers) was the way that the screens grab and attract the attention of the multitudes. People will stop walking and stare slack-jawed at a screen, pause conversations, and lose head control. Their eyes will flicker and seem to almost go blank, as their gaze and then their attention seem to be grabbed by a particular screen. Given that there are 165 different video screens in the building of various shapes and sizes, there is much to catch the eye.

Fantasies of Escape from Reality. Chester is a white male professional in his late thirties. In his interview, he expresses a sense that the Screening Room combines the allure of the exotic with the comfort of home: "So that's the ultimate place to see a game, Vegas, and I've been to Vegas, and they have nice big screens. So it gives me that kind of a feel. It just makes me feel good, to have good quality equipment and leather chairs, and it's just like, almost as good as your living room—really. Better furniture where you can really enjoy the game, and to get away from home."

Sometimes, the Screening Room is considered superior to a sports stadium, at other times superior to watching televised sports at home. Steve's "best of both worlds" means he has the comforts of home—food, drink, chair, and sports—but none of the negative distractions—phone, need to move in order to get a beer, and needful wife. As Silvio and Steve's couch comments convey it, an important element of this sense of altered reality is the sense that the Screening Room, and especially the Throne Zone, provides a simultaneous sense of both being-at-home and not-being-at-home. "Harold," a panicky, bearded white male tourist in his late forties was interviewed while he was seated in one of the Throne Zone's big seats, luxuriantly drinking a

martini while feasting on a fat-drenched cheeseburger. While he was still seated in the big chair, we asked Harold about which place the Screening Room area reminded him. "It's like being in my basement, my home. No. It's like the *fantasy* of being, what you'd want to have, at your home. You've got comfortable chairs, and the biggest screen you've ever seen. And it works. And someone's serving you. [Laughs]. And I don't know about you, but that doesn't happen in my house. [Laughs]. Yeah [quoting wife], 'You know where the kitchen is!'" (interview).

Harold's comments complete Steve and Silvio's descriptions of the Throne Zone as an improvement on home, a testosterone-colored fantasy of what home life could be like, if only. The Throne Zone has comfortable chairs and an impossibly immense television screen. It is in some sense the perfection of home—the fulfillment of Harold's desire that would take his sports watching out of the basement and grant him servants for his food and drink. Parodying his wife and laughing, Harold casts the experience as one in which he can temporarily fulfill a domestic fantasy.

A sense of the Screening Room as an idealized environment in which he is honored, included, respected, and served are also present in the comments of "Ralph," a white male in his mid-thirties: "I felt a special sense of honor [in the chairs in the Throne Zone], like this is for the ultimate sports fan. It's a 'members only' chair for the ultimate sports fan. And like do not disturb. Do not interrupt! . . . It's kind of like being on a throne with people serving you. Obviously I don't get served at home."

ormants, the recliner seems to operate metonymically, recreating sensations of protectedness and the illusion of home. It embodies all the iconic La-Z-Boy associations (from Archie Bunker to Joe Six-Pack) of couch-potato fandom. The name "throne" and the informants' fantasies of servants and respect suggest that there is also a class-based appeal to the chairs, as the exclusivity of the chairs certainly adds to their appeal and their overriding sense of enchantment. It seems that the more luxurious the chair, the more it approximates a throne. The chairs convey wealth and expense as well as comfort. With its fantasies of luxury—such as Chester's descriptions of "good quality equipment and leather chairs" and "better furniture" or Harold's midday martini sipping—these consumers speak of class ambitions temporarily fulfilled. Consumer allusions to escape (getting away from home, the telephone, and a needful wife) and travel (Chester and Steve's sense that it is like Vegas) speak of minor dissatisfaction with everyday life. These informants seem to be members of the "cult of distraction" (Kracauer [1926] 1977)—which, as Rose and Friedman (1997) note, has been traditionally associated with female media consumption—as a response to the tension and unfulfilled needs in their lives. Yet perhaps this consumption of sports in contemporary society is not so much an escape, a privilege, as it is a right, even to some extent an obligation, "an integral part of masculine work and play" (Rose and Friedman 1997, p. 3).

Resistant Practices in the Screening Room. While

resistant practices in the Screening Room are less apparent than in the Sports Arena, our field notes provide evidence that consumers manage a bit of subversion here as well. “Squatters” will sometimes drag a chair down into the Ultimate Viewing Area, establishing something of a poor man’s throne from which they will inevitably be unseated by management. Several times, we observed a Throne Zone dweller dialing out on a cell phone. Quite often their exchange would begin with “Guess where/you’ll never guess where I’m calling you from?” Gambling, while illegal and prohibited on site, is a regularly observed activity. We spoke to fantasy leaguers who use the constant stream of crawler data on the big screen to adjust their side bets.

Although it subverts the prescribed usage of chairs and data, much of this resistance still views sports, ESPN Zone Chicago, and the masculinist-competitive ideological system within which it resides in a highly positive light. For the most part, it is not critical or even appropriative poaching, but poaching in the sense of cheating in order to get a better seat, a bargain, an advantageous competitive position, or a closer look.

DISCUSSION

Screen Play

Much of the literature of play has defined and analyzed play through a paradoxical positioning. It casts play’s imaginative, experimental, free, and open elements against its goal-directed, rule-bound nature (see, e.g., Callois 1958; Huizinga 1955). Linking play and agency, we find conceptions of consumer agency as “sign domination” versus “sign experimentation” (Murray 2002), structural versus semiotic, or critical versus celebratory to be analogous and related to these conceptions of play. In both conceptions, rules set by others are either followed or broken (Deighton and Grayson 1995; Grayson 1999). The consumer is conceptualized either as a slave to the rules—and, by extension, the rule maker—or a dissenter.

Yet within the screened mediascapes of ESPN Zone Chicago, play involves ceding great latitude of freedom to consumers, who use their freedom to work within the rules of play, to break other rules, and to create new rules as they become, in effect, props for other consumers engaged in their own construction projects. For example, consider Jeremy’s hang gliding experience that gathered an active audience. Or consider the basketball players who draw in their own audiences. Think about the consumers who sit behind the ESPN Sports Center desk prop and perform impromptu impersonations to the delight of the people around them. In this radical innovation on the themed environment, the marketer enables a kind of do-it-yourself spectacle to emerge from the actions and interactions of consumers. In an environment filled with television screens, we find, surprisingly, not the “couch potato” passivity of Firat and Venkatesh’s (1995, p. 255) “voyeur.” Instead, we find voyeurism spiced up by a healthy dose of participative exhibitionism. In places, Disney manages a targeted, more permanent, and

commercialized version of Burning Man’s playful and participative atmosphere (Kozinets 2002), offering a type of emancipation that might at best be called fragmentary and momentary.

The playful nature of contemporary consumption in spectacles suggests that both the marketer and the consumer are expected to be “Tricksters,” rather than, as Grayson (1999) speculates, the marketer alone. As our virtual skeet-shooting snipers and intentionally crashing car racers illustrated, in these environments consumers are freed up not only to follow or break rules but to make new rules and create metagames and game-with-and-within-games. Their actions exemplify some of the liberating empowerment theorized by Firat and Venkatesh (1995), but because they are doing it in an corporate environment they do it in a manner that is rapidly commoditized and instantaneously commercialized—it becomes another performance ESPN Zone Chicago sells to voyeurs. Yet we must acknowledge the ways in which the experiences still offer (bounded) opportunities for identity construction, creativity, and self-expression—the very essence of emancipation as theorized by Firat and Venkatesh (1995).

Our ethnography therefore illustrates an important point: that consumer culture is currently evolving a hybrid form of spectacle. Belk (2000), Gottdiener (1997, 2000), Peñaloza (1999), Ritzer (1999), and Sherry (1998) describe spectacles that offer relatively structured paths through consumption experiences. Thus, their theories portray consumers immersed in marketer-based experiences. Producers or marketers and consumers are quite separate in these theories; the merchandising, promoting, brandscaping, and emplacement of the spectacle is clearly the responsibility of the producer or marketer. The consumers respond or resist, but they are clearly separate and apart. However, our field site reveals a more holistic engagement, characterized by a reality television-conditioned view of surveillance and exhibition, in which consumers use technology and their bodies to produce parts of the spectacle, to enact and build the brand, and to create and alter the space. Whether pressing buttons on their console to change the view on a large screen seen by dozens of others, tilting their head and body to perform for others in a video game, or trash talking to set the mood in an audience-surrounded minibasketball course, consumers exercise creative control as they become an integral part of the spectacular performance.

Video screens have become indispensable parts of the spectacular experience, providing a new form of stage that enables consumers to breach fantasy and reality, to transcend physical limitations, and to conjure the iconic spirits of the celebrity pantheon. We term the screen-dominated forms of ludic consumption we observe in this article “screen play.” Screen play is powered by scopophilia: the nigh-irresistible impulse to gaze (Freud 1905). It is apparent in the magnetic pull of screen images—game screens and television—throughout our findings. Consider, for example, the dizziness of Chad who feels immobilized by the video screens, the spinning sensation of the ethnographer who likens entry to

stepping into a gigantic television screen, or even the multitudes of people we observed simply stopping in their tracks to space out and attend to the flickering screens.

Resistance is clearly possible within these environments, but it seems to require some effort and reflexivity. Indeed, many of the violent, competitive forms of resistance we chart in this ethnography take on forms similar to and structured by the mass mediated and masculinist ideology of sport. In a themed retail space like ESPN Zone Chicago, those who do not gain pleasure from sports and television would probably choose not to enter (we would include our ethnographic colleague among these people). What would happen, though, if these hybrid types of consumption spectacle became more prevalent? What if they filled increasingly more of our civic and retail spaces? These questions link our investigation to wider concerns about consumer culture but do so in a way considerably more nuanced and attuned to the complex dialectic processes of spectacular consumption than the approaches of scholars who unreflectively reproduce critical, neo-Marxist, situationist, and postmodern positions. Questions like these are also attuned to the historical progression of these hybrid forms of consumption—as ESPN Zone stands as a pioneer of the form, others almost surely will follow.

Ritzer (1999, pp. 11–26) finds a wide scope of retail experiences encompassed by his notion of “New Forms” of spectacular consumption, including franchises and fast-food restaurants, catalogs, chain stores, shopping malls, e-commerce and cybermalls, discounters, superstores, cruise ships, casinos, game-based arcade forms, athletic facilities, luxury gated communities, educational settings, medicine and hospitals, museums and charities, and megachurches. Gottdiener (1997, 2000) sees in themed retail environments merely an interlocking piece of the consumer culture puzzle in which mass media, giant entertainment corporations, and the commercial control of consumer fantasies build an image-driven environment instantiated in a web of television programming, film images, communications networks, Internet images and communications, and virtual simulations. Continuing to investigate ethnographically questions of agency in any of these field sites, using any of these constructs, would further our understanding of the complexities of consumer culture and increase our understanding of the critical power dynamics that create, maintain, and transform contemporary consumer culture.

In contrast to Ritzer (1999, p. x), who tends to fall back on a critical view of agency in spectacular environments, seeing them as places that “are structured to lead and even coerce us into consumption,” our article strengthens and develops the viewpoint that sees consumer responses even to spectacular environments as relatively complex dialectical affairs involving arrays of tactical moves, in which all social actors endlessly adapt and change. The dialectics of compliance-resistance, control-license, self-other, reality-unreality, and even work-play manifest in consumer behavior at ESPN Zone Chicago are captured in this notion of the ludic. Playing-consuming at ESPN Zone Chicago, the

consumer is both sovereign and manipulated, subject and object, passive and active, individualist and conformist, exploited and emancipated, and hero and fool. When consumers deploy their ludic gaze, their agency becomes semivolitional: an interagency. Interagency is both processual and substantive, consenting and conceding, and vigilant and relaxed.

In contrast to Gottdiener (2000) and Ritzer (1999), who emphasize the variety of consumption opportunities available in spectacular environments as the key to conceptualizing them as “New Forms” or “New Means” of consumption, we find two central ludic elements that are more deserving of the claim of novelty, and which develop our understanding of play in contemporary consumption environments. First is the ontological setting apart in real space of a liminoid zone for a commercialized form of deep play. Second is the radically increased opportunity for consumers to shift from passive audience members to participative actors in a world of media culture motifs, images, roles, and identities. These environmental elements are interrelated and simultaneously present. We detail and develop them in the following two sections, and then in a short concluding section we draw out our ethnographic findings’ implications for an enhanced understanding of consumer agency.

Liminoid Real Estate

Firat and Venkatesh (1995, pp. 252–53) have noted the importance of virtual, digital simulations in creating new social realities and have generally cast them as a potential route to consumer “reempowerment.” Aukstalis and Blatner (1992) note the ability of cyberspace to grant seemingly ultimate power, enabling its audience not only to observe a reality but also to enter it and actually to experience it as if it were reality. To a certain extent, the same appears to be true of television screens (O’Guinn and Shrum 1997). Throughout consumer play at ESPN Zone Chicago, we found the creation of new worlds that consumers interpreted as different realities: from escaping home to being transported to the ballpark, being caught up in simulations of fly-fishing and horse racing, hang gliding and impossible bowling simulations, or male fantasies that one is the master of a perfect domestic moment. With its many worlds evoking and transcending home—from virtual video games to themed eating areas to hyperintensified television rooms—ESPN Zone Chicago does not offer a mere dialectical tacking between alternatives, but a simultaneity of offerings, a “heterotopia,” a place that is “capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible” (Foucault 1986, p. 25).

Enthroned like kings in recliners before immense screens or competing from within virtual realms, our consumer informants demonstrate how their imaginations and extended selves are experienced as a type of “telepresence,” perceiving themselves as located in a real environment that is temporally or spatially distant (Campanella 2001, p. 27). In this condition, an informant is telepresent in the remote environment, and that environment is telepresent in the physical

space. Similarly, McCarthy's (2001) analysis of ambient television finds that television use outside the home is used as a way to alter consumers' sense of reality and place—a conclusion that our study indicates might extend to all other avenues of screened consumption. As Firat and Venkatesh (1995) speculated, there is considerable transcendent power in this condition, for it offers consumers the possibility of moving with greater ease and speed between social categories that have heretofore been more separated, such as inside-outside, reality-fantasy, and public-private.

What we find here are multiple instances of an activity that Ackerman (1999) would recognize as "deep play," a form of play that requires self-experimentation and the suspension of ordinary social rules. Take as examples the intensity of play we record in the actions of Jeremy and Eric, the two brothers, and in Jack's realistic recounting of his simulated experience of football (where he could almost see the stadium and hear the crowd roaring in response to his actions). Recall also the powerful physical effects, the emphasis on exertion, and the delight in exertion in the bowling ball simulation that Alexander describes. Cassandra relates the loss of self in a sports-oriented fantasy, while both Chad and Steve are overwhelmed and lose themselves in the play of the gigantic television screens in the Screening Room. Callois (1958) has termed these Dionysian elements "ilinx" or "vertigo," a loss of control that is actually a pleasurable surrender to the dizziness of overwhelming experience. Our ethnography demonstrates how many—but certainly not all—consumers throughout ESPN Zone Chicago actually find surrender pleasurable. This sense of ecstatic, transcendent surrender, of rapture and return, links the conception of play to religion, ritual, sacrifice, and the sacred. While Ritzer (1999) links these places to enchantment and religion in terming them "cathedrals of consumption," his descriptions of a consumer religion that leads us to hyperconsumption are focused again on the critical and the ideological while eliding the potential for empowerment and emancipation. These notions, however, suggest that further consumer research investigations of identity creation and self-expressive and sacred aspects of consumption are incomplete without commensurate consideration of their playful elements as well, which may be studied in a remarkable diversity of ethnographic consumption field sites.

The Obverse Panopticon

Given the presence of audience applause sound tracks, visual depictions of audiences watching the players, spotlights shining down from the ceiling on players, and multiple elevated stages, it is a reasonable interpretation that ESPN Zone Chicago is in the business of selling consumers the fantasy of being superstar athletes, celebrities, or famous figures. Consumers enjoy temporarily entering into the superior reality of the sports celebrity, experiencing that world, and being seen experiencing it. The element of seeing and being seen is important here and relates directly to concepts of self, role, and identity. Lacan ([1949] 1977) theorizes that the self is constituted visually through an outer gaze pro-

jected inward. His mirror theory of the self holds that the autonomous self is constituted as an optical effect produced as a person tries to imagine inhabiting a landscape conceptualized as the field of other people's gazes. Given that cultural fetishism dominates our consumer informants' gaze, it is unsurprising that they seem to be using ESPN Zone Chicago's stage to produce themselves in a world they desire, full of people who want them and who want to watch them.

In a past investigation, we used the term "obverse panopticism" to refer to ESPN Zone Chicago's architecture, and to the way in which many consumers watched lone corporate programmers broadcast images from central consoles (Sherry et al. 2001, p. 499). Here we suggest an even more appropriate use of the term. Recall that in Foucault and Bentham's metaphor-invention, they use the panopticon to refer to the unwelcome observation of prisoners by guards, the causal origin of the self-disciplinary gaze by which people exercise restraint over their own desires. Ritzer (1999) uses this as a central image to explore the surveillance and control aspects of spectacular and enchanting retail environments. We use the antonymic term "obverse panopticon" to refer to a physical structure designed specifically to enable the consumer's desire to be observed. An "obverse panopticon" is a structure designed at least in part around the exhibitionistic desire of consumers, around their need for a stage on which they can participate for an eager—and captive—audience in a confined space. Given the dominant-submissive dynamics of the situation, obverse panopticism then becomes a libidinally charged form of surveillance for consumers, a place similar in some senses to the private-public conflation of webcams and reality television.

As a commercial prototype, ESPN Zone masterfully monetizes the obverse panopticon form. For the power to gather an audience to watch you take a turn as star of a video game, consumers must pay. To stay enthroned in the comfortable Throne Zone, in the presence of the large screens and under the watchful eye of envious others, or in the faux broadcast booth of the restaurant, consumers must continue to order food or drink. ESPN Zone Chicago's scores of ambient television installations also provide consumers with a new sense of identity as it offers them vicarious experiences of athleticism, as identification and role modeling conflate viewing with achieving (see McCarthy 2001, p. 161). In the Sports Arena, Jack, Jeremy, Eric, and Cassandra's play-related fantasies readily demonstrate this sort of vicarious achievement. Computer and television screens are windows between the real and the virtual through which consumers pass to become "tel-athletes," their projective fantasies of athletic accomplishment made tangible by the tube. They are buying not only fantasy fulfillment but also a sense of attention and even appreciation, elevation, and worthiness.

Lasch's (1979) pathologizing argument suggests that the culture of celebrity can cultivate anxieties about inferiority that can fuel, in a self-propelling vicious cycle, self-aggrandizing yet unattainable fantasies of unlimited fame and success. Our research contributes to the understanding

of contemporary spectacle by linking it to these notions of consumer anxiety and narcissism, demonstrating how some forms of themed retail can emplace and monetize these simultaneous fantasy-neuroses. The situationist philosopher Lefebvre (1976) wrote that capitalism has succeeded in growing mainly because it has occupied and produced physical space. ESPN Zone, a corporation, has used the themed retail form to construct an obverse panopticon: a place where consumers themselves may participate in the action, temporarily becoming a part of the spectacle. This form of environment effectively capitalizes on the anxieties that Lasch (1979) notes, temporarily offering sustenance to feed a culture of narcissism, and it does so in a way that generates profit from consumer identification with mass media images and roles. The obverse panopticon provides consumers with temporary ways of touching greatness that momentarily, and for an affordable price, offer the perception of fame and success.

CONSUMER AGENCY

Sociologists and anthropologists have for decades attempted to specify precisely the relationship points between individuals and their collectives, and they have been vexed at every turn because of the embeddedness of the one construct in other. We find questions about consumer agency to be analogous. In a manner exactly parallel to the relation of individual needs to those of their collectives, we find the needs of a consumer group (sports fans, mainly male ones) instantiated and gratified by the efforts of a producer group (Disney and ESPN) in our field site. Similarly and simultaneously, interests favoring mass media corporations like Disney are naturalized and culturalized into the interests of the consumers we studied at ESPN Zone Chicago.

Because they have been satisfied, consumers like Jeremy and Eric say that they will return—they see ESPN Zone Chicago as a good thing. Their satisfaction is based on identification: consumers like Jeremy and Eric are sports-loving members of their culture, which is itself a creation of a complex combination of commercial and social forces. Media culture and consumer culture are, as Jansson (2002) notes, theoretically overlapping and empirically inseparable constructs (see also Gottdiener 1997; Kozinets 2001). On the level of research empirics and lived experience, this means that brand, media, and celebrity images from the world of film, television, music, video games, and sports are profoundly interrelated and practically inseparable from consumers' self-images. Media images are very often noted as important guides for consumer fantasies, and through them they are theorized to influence the economic world of demand for goods and services.

As our data show, Hollywood—sports image culture is embodied and enacted not only by producers but consumers in a range of environments, including themed retail. Our notions of ontology and liminoid reality, however, suggest a subtler understanding of the relation between media images and consumer fantasy as it is situated in a spectacular environment. For to deprive consumers' aspirations as

mere “fantasy” and to assert that commercial producers “control” consumer's fantasies, as Gottdiener (1997) and Ritzer (1999) tend to do, is to neglect the type of image work that consumers demonstrate in our field site. Jack, Eric, and Alexander feel real accomplishment—perhaps even real inspiration—at their gaming achievements. Jeremy feels a real sense of adventure when he hang glides. In heated competition on the courts of ESPN Zone Chicago, real winners and losers are made. Harold and Steve truly escape the routines of their daily lives and inject some desired excitement. Consumers also creatively make their own play and devise their own fantasies, riffing with the raw materials at hand—imagistic and otherwise. To dismiss the intimate connections between intention and role modeling, between alterity and self-image, and between observing and doing, is to miss key aspects about what it is to be human and also to ignore the intimate feedback loops that create the stories, myths, and entertainment that endlessly enrich human culture. Refracted through consumer fantasy, consumer agency in an image-driven culture may have become indistinct. It may be indistinct, however, not because consumers are deceived or confined but because they (at least some of them) are inspired and satisfied.

Consider the many instances of consumer performance recounted above. ESPN Zone Chicago—the producer—provides consumers with a different type of stage. Sports fan consumers need this stage in order to perform. The performance turns the consumer into a producer. The consumer uses sports for fantasy and fulfillment, enacting this through performance at ESPN Zone Chicago. Sport, as players are consuming and producing it, is created by the mass media and entertainment industry, including Disney and ESPN. The enacted production of the consumer is part of the production staged, loosely, by ESPN Zone Chicago, the producer. Instead of a dichotomous view of agency in which two parties—consumers and producers—vie for control, our findings at ESPN Zone Chicago vividly illustrate another model: one of embedded consumer-producers, where consumers produce producers' products at the same time and as much as producers consume consumers' consumption. From our vantage point within the hybrid spectacle of ESPN Zone Chicago, we can see how the wills of consumers and producers turn out to be far more overlapping, mutual, and interdependent than commonly recognized.

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