II. IDENTITY

4. Consumption and Authenticity in the Collectible Strategy Games Subculture

J. Patrick Williams

There is a strand of contemporary cultural theory that draws links between people's consumption practices and their personal and collective identities (e.g., Bourdieu 1986; Giddens 1991). One important part of this theoretical strand posits that culture industries organize the production, distribution and consumption of cultural goods in hegemonic ways so as to maximize the rational accumulation of profits. At the same time, culture industries provide people with so-called "choices" about what and how to consume and the resulting authenticity of identities that get constructed (van Leeuwen 2005). If there is a direct correlation between consumption and identity, then we could expect to find this correlation to be highly salient within the organization and expression of collectible strategy game (CSG) subculture, a collection of leisure worlds grounded in the rational consumption and use of *collectible* game items. Through participant observation in and interviews with members of four CSG player networks in the southeast United States, I critically investigate the relationship between consumption practices and the construction of "authentic" subcultural identities.[1] In doing this, I analytically distinguish between *organizational* and *expressive* dimensions of the subculture. The organizational dimension refers to how the gaming industry structures gameplay as well as how an objectified status hierarchy is established. The expressive dimension refers to the intersubjective accomplishment of subcultural identity. In terms of subculture theory, this chapter problematizes the relationship between subcultural consumption and subcultural authenticity. At a broader sociological level, it highlights how individuals simultaneously rely on consumptive

cultural practices, yet resist dominant meanings of consumption as they construct a positive image of the (sub)cultural self.

The data presented below come from two ethnographic studies on collectible card games and collectible miniatures games. Although I sought to learn both games for fun, I also approached both with explicit research goals in mind. The first project was between January and May of 1997; the second was from January to November 2004. The research took me to retail gaming stores, gaming club meetings in a university center, and people's homes, where I engaged in recreational and tournament play.

I collected data through participant observation and in-depth interviewing strategies. I spent hundreds of hours actively playing *Magic* and *Mage Knight*, as well as observing others play. Regular members of all four player networks knew that I was a sociologist and that I was researching collectible gaming in addition to learning to play. During many of my participant observation sessions, I kept a notebook handy and occasionally jotted down notes to record verbal and non-verbal behaviors that I found relevant to my research agenda. I regularly wrote fieldnotes after returning home from gameplay. I conducted in-depth interviews with seven *Magic* players and one focus group with five additional players. I made audio recordings of the sessions and transcribed all audio tapes to enable close analysis of participants' talk. In addition, I informally questioned several other *Magic* and *Mage Knight* players about various aspects of the game and made detailed notes about our conversations. In all cases, I assigned pseudonyms to participants to protect their identities and subsequently reduced their pseudonyms to a single letter for this chapter.[2]

Brief Histories of Magic *and* Mage Knight

Since 1993, when Wizards of the Coast released *Magic: The Gathering*, collectible card games and collectible miniature games have dramatically increased in visibility and usage across fantasy gaming populations. Collectible card games have been produced for many popular sci-fi and fantasy worlds, including *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *The X-Files*, *Pokémon* and *Yu-Gi-Oh*. The most popular collectible miniatures games are also based on sci-fi and fantasy, including *Mage Knight*, *MechWarrior*, *Warhammer*, *Dungeons and Dragons*, and comic book-based *HeroClix*. Collectors wishing to stay up-to-date with the items these companies produce and players wishing to be competitive buy or trade for hundreds or even thousands of US dollars worth of cards or miniatures every year, as well as remain cognizant of the latest rules, storylines, and play formats. Being a

collectible game player therefore requires both monetary and subcultural commitments.

Collecting is a fundamental aspect of CSG subculture. Owens and Helmer (1996: 12, 16) describe how collectible card games actually comprise two games in one:

> The new card games added another twist: players couldn't buy all [the] cards at once. They could buy a box of 60; they could buy a pack of 8 cards ... or even just a single card. But companies printing the playing cards wouldn't sell all the cards together. Collecting a whole set was like a game itself.... Collectible card games are two games in one: playing the cards and collecting the cards. Both games depend on the luck of the draw, as well as your skill in playing the hand you've been dealt.

CSGs all operate under the same basic format: game producers create items that vary in terms of in-game usability and rarity. With few exceptions, the rarer or more powerful the item, the more collectible it becomes. Gamers seek out these rare and/or powerful items either as a form of curatorial consumption (Tankel and Murphy 1998) or to use during gameplay. In both instances, owning such items enhances their prestige within local, regional, national and international player networks.

The length to which gamers will go to procure these items should not be underestimated. At the annual GenCon fantasy convention in southern California in 2003, a factory-sealed case — 4,800 randomly packaged cards — of *Magic*'s first expansion, *Arabian Nights*, sold at auction for $95,000 (Buehler 2003). *Magic*'s "Power Nine," nine cards considered by many in CSG subculture to comprise the Holy Grail of collectible cards, can be found on EBay selling at $3,000 or more for the set, while first edition copies of the greatest of these cards (the alpha *Black Lotus*) have sold there for more than $2,200. While such cards may be at the extreme end of collectibility, their value reflects how many player-collectors feel about CSGs.

Magic was released in 1993 by Wizards of the Coast, who licensed the game from its inventor, Richard Garfield. According to Garfield, it was the first collectible card game (Garfield 1995). The game was developed on the premise that decks of cards represent the mental repertoire of sorcerers who duel with each other for supremacy on a fantasy world called Dominia. Because every sorcerer's repertoire is the result of her/his unique life experiences, no two deck of cards is likely to be the same. Each *Magic* card has a specific function in the game — generally speaking, there are cards that represent a sorcerer's energy and the spells s/he knows: spells for attack, defense, creature summoning, and so on. Some cards are rarer than others, which is the basis of the collectible aspect of the game — a player might buy dozens of card packs without getting a copy of a particular rare card.[3]

Players typically do not buy ready-to-play decks of cards, though Wizards of the Coast began marketing this option several years ago as pre-constructed "theme" decks or championship replica decks. Rather, players buy packs of cards without knowing their exact contents. There are starter packs of sixty cards and booster packs of fifteen cards. Starters cost less than $10 and boosters cost about $3. Gamers choose any number of cards (the exact number might vary, though tournament rules require exactly sixty) and build a deck. The player then finds one or more players with a deck and they duel each other, each using her/his own deck.

In order to keep the game constantly fresh, Wizards of the Coast issues new sets of cards three or four times each year, called expansions. Expansions have an overarching theme based on some part of Dominia. Expansions also introduce new mechanics that alter how the game is played. There are literally billions of potential decks that players can create, but certain combinations of cards will almost always outperform others. While *Magic* may have started out relatively small, the game is now sold in dozens of countries and the cards are printed in several languages, including Chinese, German, Italian and Korean. Wizards of the Coast has also developed World Championship and Grand Prix circuits, where top players compete for tens of thousands of dollars annually.

In some ways, *Mage Knight* follows in the footprints made by *Magic*. However, *Mage Knight* is unique in its own right. Instead of cards, *Mage Knight* is a game of collectible miniature figures invented by Jordan Weisman of WizKids Games in 1999. These small, pre-painted plastic figures resemble humans, elves, orcs, dragons, and other mythical creatures. According to the *Mage Knight* rulebook, each player represents "a powerful warlord: a king, baron, or high wizard who sends his or her troops out to do battle with opposing armies" (WizKids 2003). Miniature figures have been used by strategy war gamers since at least the early 19th century (Fine 1983; Paxson 1971), but what makes *Mage Knight* figures unique is the base on which the figures stands, which includes a "combat dial." This invention created a new way to use miniatures for gameplay by simplifying their use. "No cumbersome record sheets are required to track a unit's combat values and accumulated damage. Instead, all of a unit's combat statistics and abilities are located on the combat dial" (WizKids 2004). Like *Magic* cards, *Mage Knight* figures vary in rarity and power.

Players buy packs of randomly assorted figures and then assemble armies, which they use to battle with or against other players. *Mage Knight* is somewhat more expensive than *Magic*. A starter pack (which comes with a rulebook and some accessories) costs about $20 for eight figures, while a booster pack of four figures costs about $8. A *Mage Knight* army can vary

in size from two to as many as perhaps twenty figures. Individual figures have a point value upon which players rely when building armies. Players agree on the total point size of an army (for example 300 points) before playing and then assemble a group of figures that comes as close as possible to that number without going over. Like *Magic*, *Mage Knight* is released in expansions. Each game relies on a different randomizing mechanic. In *Magic*, players shuffle their decks between games while in *Mage Knight*, players use two six-sided dice when they engage in combat. These randomizers are key aspects of the game that help ensure some modicum of equality between players.

Two Dimensions of Subculture

As I sketched out a map of the relationships between consumption and subcultural identity, I found it useful to analytically separate the subculture into two dimensions: organizational and expressive. The former refers to the commodity-oriented organization of CSG subculture, while the latter refers to the intersubjective means through which players develop meaningful identities. I begin by exploring the organizational dimension, emphasizing how gameplay is organized by game producers and how this organization structures an objectified form of status-identity. I then turn to the expressive dimension to show how gamers resist the notion of conspicuous consumption in favor of expressions of cultural identity

The Organizational Dimension

Cultural theories of consumption and taste operate under the notion that "the meaning of our lives is to be found in what we consume" (Storey 1996:114). The now oftentimes taken-for-granted relationship between cultural objects and people's selves emerged out of changes in Western societies that created a culture of consumption. Consumer culture saturates our everyday lives and our social selves, embedding us within consumer-based networks. "Popular culture's emphasis on entertainment and commodification of the self" promotes the idea of "identity as a resource to satisfy individually oriented needs and interests to be whomever you want" (Altheide 2000:12). Overall, there seems to be a growing consensus among many scholars that people rely increasingly on commercially available products, including leisure commodities, to construct status- and cultural identities (Beck 1992; Dayan 1986; Giddens 1991; Hodkinson 2002; Warde 1994).

The organizational dimension of a subculture is characterized by the flow of material and nonmaterial "cultural objects" (Griswold 1994) among producers, distributors and consumers. Understanding that the role-playing game subculture requires material resources to support itself, Fine (1989) outlined a theoretical approach to explain how the gaming industry uses resources to attract and retain participants. Fine's primary focus was on the relationship between material conditions and participation in game subcultures. In order to facilitate the survival and/or growth of a game subculture, companies help develop social infrastructures and distribute material and nonmaterial resources to participants. For example, game producers provide a regular flow of new or "revised" game items (e.g., cards, miniatures, rulebooks, errata, gaming accessories) that must be purchased by participants. In addition producers provide, in conjunction with retailers, opportunities for players to socialize and to construct status- and cultural identities through organized play. Thus, game producers are largely responsible for organizing the material and social dimensions of game subculture. The organization structure is characterized by rules, events, game mechanics, media and markets, all of which shape gamers' consumption practices and their status-identities.

Rules

Rules, at their simplest, prescribe directions for behavior. Almost every facet of gameplay is limited by game and tournament rules issued either by the game companies (at the subcultural level) or informally decreed by local gamers as "house rules" (at the idiocultural level). Rules impact the organization of CSG subculture in two ways. First, the rules require regular monetary investment on the part of players. Second, the rules can be selectively enforced to benefit players with "insider" status.

The game companies' control is perhaps most evident in the publication of official rulebooks. Rulebooks are regularly revised in order to keep gameplay "fair" for all involved. One consequence of new rulebooks, however, is that players must reinvest money in order to meet the newest rules. With each new expansion of *Magic* and *Mage Knight*, the game companies print rulebooks and include them with starter and/or booster packs to provide structure for gameplay. Both companies also regularly publish comprehensive rules and errata on their websites that clarify or change specific rules. Rule changes sometimes make certain cards or figures illegal for tournament play, oftentimes causing players to invest more money in replacement items. Rulebooks do more than simply codify gameplay, however. Both *Magic* and *Mage Knight* rulebooks introduce players to the mythical worlds represented in the games. Rulebooks thus simultaneously

structure both the shared fantasy in which gameplay is embedded as well as the mechanics of gameplay.

Companies also require that referees oversee "sanctioned" play (see below). In most cases, local shop owners serve as referees. Referees are responsible for keeping up to date on the latest errata, ensuring that no cheating occurs, and promoting a positive environment in which to play. Referees are able to enforce a "definition of the situation" (Thomas 1923) on gameplay and thus serve an important function in policing the boundary between more central and more marginal players, a hierarchy that is often defined by the most powerful players within a player network (Fine 1983). During one of the first *Mage Knight* tournaments in which I participated, I beat another player, whom I will call "Q." Q was a long-time amateur player and a loyal customer at the local game shop. I had only been playing about six weeks at the time. I placed second overall and Q placed third. When it came time to award the three tournament prizes provided by WizKids for the event, the referee announced that, because Q had let another contestant borrow a figure for the tournament, he earned "fellowship" standing and could take the second-place tournament prize, leaving the third-place prize to me. Not understanding, I questioned the referee. He explained that WizKids had a tournament rule that allowed the referee to reward players who showed a commitment to building "community." The rule is thus selectively enforced by referees to reward players who put the community above themselves.

While rules are well-intentioned, they may be abused. For example, when I once visited a *Mage Knight* tournament simply to observe gameplay, a player told me about another local shop owner who regularly allowed his friends to enter tournaments and to bend or break rules to win rare prizes. When other players complained, the shop owner invoked his status as a referee to make final decisions about gameplay and told players that if they did not agree with the rulings they could remove themselves from the game. One result of such rulings is that central players are likely to win more valuable prizes than more marginal players. The value of the prize is subcultural rather than merely economic; that is, its rarity is coveted more than its cash value (see Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981). In short, the value of subcultural items may result in the selective application of rules that create or maintain status hierarchies.

Sanctioned Events

Companies gameplay in ways that require that participants pay to play. Wizards of the Coast supports "Arena" and "Friday Night Magic" tournament leagues, for example. These leagues serve to separate recreational players from more competitive players, giving each an environ-

ment in which to play the game. Similarly, WizKids has a sanctioned tournament league in retail stores for games in its product line. For *Mage Knight* and *Magic* players, many tournaments are "constructed events," meaning that players construct an army/deck from among their figures/cards at home and arrive ready to play. Wizards of the Coast charges a fee for participation, while WizKids does not, and each company offers rare items as weekly prizes to the top three finishers. For recreational and competitive players alike, the chance to win limited edition prizes is worth the price to register. One gamer I interviewed felt that players, the companies and retail stores all benefited from the leagues:

> The Friday Night Magic series and ... Arena ... is a way to get people who are semi-casual players or casual players that they want to turn into tournament type players by combining a competitive aspect every Friday at your local game store with prizes and with promotional material [S, interview].

Players benefit because the company and retailer set aside time and space specifically for them to gather and play (see also Fine 1989). The companies benefit because the leagues attract players with the lure of prizes into coming regularly to compete, which increases the likelihood that the players will remain interested in the game and continue to buy game-related products. Retail stores benefit from the foot traffic generated by the company's official support of the league.

Regardless of the fee charged or whether they won a prize, several participants reported that they would regularly buy a few booster packs when they spent time at a retail store. One gamer talked about his small but regular purchases as "natural": "[a]nd another thing that's just great about *Magic* is just like ... I guess it's human nature, but just ... opening a pack of cards and then seeing what you got" [J, interview]. This excerpt can be interpreted in different ways. From a critical perspective, the organization of game play helps ensure that both the company and the retailer benefit monetarily from players' involvement, while the players' "needs" for things are also satisfied (Marcuse 1966[2002]). Yet from a more contemporary "ordinary consumption" perspective (e.g., Granow and Warde 2001), the player's purchases are simply a routinized aspect of his identity. "Consumption is not inherently good or bad, but it is deeply human" (Hine 2002:*x*).

Routinized consumption is common among gamers and game companies understand how lucrative weekly tournament leagues can be in facilitating consumptive practices. Some of these events are "limited format events," which characterize a more formal method of controlling gamers' consumption practices. Unlike a constructed event, a limited format event is one in which players are required to buy the cards/figures at

the event in order to participate — no cards/figures can be brought from outside the venue. For example, in *Magic* "sealed draft" tournaments, players purchase one starter pack and two booster packs of cards (totaling about $15), from which they must build a deck with which to compete.[4] In a limited format *Mage Knight* event, players buy three booster packs (totaling about $24) and build a 300-point army.

Even basic tournament formats limit the types of cards/figures that players can legally use. In *Magic*, the company has divided tournaments into several formats, the most popular of which is loosely referred to as "Type 2." According to the company, the idea behind Type 2 was that new and advanced players should have "equal" access to rare and powerful cards, so the company limited the number of expansions that are legal in tournament play to those printed roughly within the previous twelve months — typically three expansions. This way, if a gamer started playing Type 2 *Magic* tournaments today, s/he would have "equal" access to all legal cards because all of them are a year old or less and still available at retail stores. In *Mage Knight*, figures from older expansions are "retired" and become illegal in restricted tournament play as new expansions — usually twice each year — are released.

From many players' perspectives, however, the companies organize their games in such a way so that players are "forced" to buy the newest cards/figures in order to remain competitive. This tests the loyalty and willingness of players to continue investing money in items they believe will be worthless once they cycle out of the Type 2 environment: "from time to time everybody gets burned out and they'll quit ... it happens time and time again. [...] A lot of the game became about money" [C, interview]. Not only is player loyalty tested, but the burn out effect results in an active secondary market where players buy, sell and trade used cards. This secondary market, discussed below, functions as a type of informal organization that channels the (re)distribution of collectible items and thus provides an additional site for consumption.

Game Mechanics

In CSGs, new mechanics are developed and introduced in new expansions. Each of these mechanical changes attempts to revitalize fan interest by changing how the game is played. Yet, such changes in the structure of gameplay are polysemic. Industry spokespeople and many players see the evolution of game mechanics as invigorating because it forces players to think about the game in new ways. Other players, however, argue that the companies engage in a form of "one-upsmanship" with themselves by constantly pushing the limit of game design. One player argued that "because Wizards of the Coast has to make money off *Magic*, they always have to top themselves and, you know make better decks" [J, interview].

Gamers see the constant evolution of game mechanics as part-and-parcel of the Type 2 environment.

By introducing "stronger" mechanics with each expansion, Wizards of the Coast and WizKids assure themselves that players will not remain satisfied with the game as it "used to be." Rather players feel the need to buy the newest items, either to experience new mechanics or to remain competitive. One player told me that, because a couple of his close friends regularly bought new cards that utilized new mechanics, he also felt it was necessary to buy them in order to keep up—it was not fun "doing your best and building what you think is an awesome deck and then going ... and having someone just completely squash you" [K, interview]. As they talked, players also expressed awareness of the marketing strategies in which gaming companies engage. Yet, while the awareness exists, the game subculture is organized in such a way that players still feel the need to consume increasing quantities of cards/figures. Buying and playing new cards/figures not only may improve company profits, but may also act as a source of objectified subcultural status-identities for players who successfully integrate the newest items into gameplay.

Subcultural Media and Markets

Two additional organizational aspects of CSGs are worth mentioning. First, various print and digital media are dedicated to collectible fantasy gaming and provide detailed knowledge sources for new and experienced players alike. Both Wizards of the Coast and WizKids maintain a complex presence on the internet. Each company has a vast inventory of game-related information for players to access. Not only are there pictures and descriptions of almost every card or figure ever produced, the internet also provides a plethora of forums and knowledge vaults that players can tap for deck/army design and strategy tips from pros, as well as amateur player communities. In addition to official company websites, print magazines such *The Duelist*, *Scrye*, and *Inquest* focus explicitly on CSGs. Via these print and digital media, players can find up-to-the-minute rule errata, lists of winning decks or armies, and articles from industry insiders on play developments, strategies, and sneak-peeks at upcoming collectible game products. Both print and electronic media also offer promotional game items to subscribers, thus coaxing more spending by players. For example, magazines will occasionally contain promotional cards or offers to receive promotional items—gamers are more likely to buy a $7 magazine if they receive special offers for "limited edition" items. Similarly, internet sites also advertise limited edition items from time to time. The owners of *Realmworx*, an online *Mage Knight* community, worked with WizKids to produce a series of limited editions relics for use in *Mage Knight* tournament play.

Secondly, retail and secondary markets facilitate the consummation of competitive players' desires for the cards/figures that, according to industry insiders, are certain to help them win games. Retailers and players alike regularly open booster packs and sell rare cards/figures separately. Some players avoid buying booster packs at $3 each (for *Magic*) or $8 each (for *Mage Knight*) and risking not getting the items they want. Instead, they can shop in retail shops and online for cards/figures at prices ranging from less than $1 to more than $50 for a rare card set or a unique figure. This is perhaps most obvious on Ebay, where tens of thousands of auctions exist at any given time.[5] By buying individual cards or figures, players bypass one of the perceived problems of these games—being overwhelmed with multiple copies of useless common items. Once purchased, these unique or rare items equip the player with a powerful arsenal to overcome rival players.

The Objectification of Status-Identity

Together, the rules, tournament formats, game mechanics, media and markets highlight the organization and maintenance of status-identity within the subculture. This organization supports an objectified form of subcultural status-identity. Thornton (1995) uses the term "objectified subcultural capital" to refer to tangible objects—like record albums—that reflect and represent the status of club-going youth, while Csikszentmihalyi (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981) refers more generally to the meaning of objects as status symbols. In the CSG subculture, status is quantified and objectified in two forms: rankings and limited edition cards/figures.

First, status hierarchies are objectified through players' win-loss records and rank, which are recorded by referees at sanctioned events and managed by the game companies. Within both *Magic*'s and *Mage Knight*'s tournament systems, players are ranked according to their win-loss records. Every time I entered a *Mage Knight* tournament, the referee would record my wins and losses for that day. He would then log onto the WizKids website and enter this information into their database, which is immediately available to anyone with a web browser. The win-loss record affects a player's overall rank in the gaming community at the local, state, national and international level. And because most *Mage Knight* players pre-register online for tournaments, they can compare their ranks against other registered players before or after tournaments. Rank has consequences. When doing research, for example, I initially sought out highly ranked players to talk to, uncritically assuming that their knowledge was more valuable to me. Other players similarly gave status to players simply because of their win-loss records, which some players touted at tournaments and social games alike, thereby making status claims.

Second, limited edition and promotional items are coveted by gamers

as status markers. In *Magic*, tournament prizes are based on the alternate art concept. As one player explained it, Wizards of the Coast takes the most often-used cards ("staple" cards) and prints different art on them.

> ... So if you win a tournament in Arena or Friday Night Magic, you usually get some kind of staple card, like it used to be *Disenchant*, then *Fireball* and *Counterspell*— all had alternate art. [...] I think that's awesome cuz it shows that you're into the game and it gives you that pride like, "Yea, I'm good enough to have an alternate-art *Disenchant*" [S, interview].

In *Mage Knight*, tournament players can win limited edition figures. Whereas standard figures (commons and rares alike) have black/white combat dials, the limited edition figures are printed in black/gold. In both games, players expressed the belief that, by playing these limited edition items, they were displaying their status relative to players who did not have them. The card/figure represented either the time spent in the subculture (being "old school") or their skill in tournament play.

This objectified form of identity is build around status, in which gamers are ranked hierarchically. But what does all this *mean* to the players? Are there differences among players that affect the meanings they attributed to games or the game subculture? What about players who preferred the social aspects of gaming over its competitive aspects (Avedon and Sutton-Smith 1971)? In order to shed light on these questions, we can consider the expressive dimension of the subculture.

The Expressive Dimension

Magic and *Mage Knight* each have an organizational dimension that emphasizes and supports monetary commitment from players and how players' identities are linked to these commodities, albeit in objectified form. Many other leisure subcultures are rooted in the consumption of cultural objects as well. The subcultural consumption of commodities does not always follow a dominant (i.e., subculture industry) logic, however. Donnelly and Young (1988) explored the importance of subcultural consumption and display among neophyte rock climbers, including "wearing climbing clothes and boots in nonclimbing settings [and] carrying equipment, books and magazines about climbing as conspicuously as possible" (p. 229-30). Following suit, Wheaton (2000) noted that some windsurfers focused on consuming and displaying subcultural items such as boards, wetsuits and clothing rather than focusing on improving their windsurfing skills. In these and other cases (e.g., Thornton 1995; Williams 2004), the researchers found that some subculture members deemphasized such conspicuous consumption in favor of alternative discourses of authenticity.

Wheaton (2000) explored how windsurfers constructed and negotiated subcultural identity vis-à-vis windsurfing commodities. She found that participants "could not "buy" their way into the core of the subculture" (p. 263). Rather, windsurfers expressed "authentic" subcultural identities through alternative means: avoiding popular commodities (which she labels "style denial"), the time they spend at the beach, their surfing skill, and mental and emotional commitment to the sport. Similarly, Williams and Copes (2005) examined how a sense of authenticity among participants in the straightedge subculture extends beyond the physical markers of subcultural identity to include both immaterial concerns (e.g, values and beliefs) and everyday practices. The expressive dimension thus emphasizes cultural identity over and above status-identity and is reminiscent of previous studies on the symbolic work that occurs in everyday life around cultural media and products (e.g., Willis 1990).

These alternative discourses highlight the complex processes through which gamers construct subcultural identity. Player's identities are visible through multiple symbolic markers including the items with which they play, knowledge of the game environment and history, and gaming style or the skills one has in building winning decks/armies. Further, players emphasize the importance of commitment to the gaming community over win-loss records or the accumulation of rare items. In fact, multiple, overlapping processes are involved in the construction of "authentic" identities. In addition to owning and playing collectible game items, gamers also have to demonstrate a broader love for fantasy and fantasy games, a willingness to build community, and skills as a strategist.

Authentic Players Love Games

Being good at any particular game is not a sufficient criterion for other gamers to attribute status to that player. All the players I talked to saw themselves as more than just *Magic* or *Mage Knight* players— they saw themselves as gamers in a broader sense. Nobody I interviewed or asked informally reported being interesting *only* in these CSGs. Rather, they played a variety of other fantasy- and strategy-based games. Players reported playing *Legends of the Five Rings*, *Star Wars*, *D&D*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Vampire: The Eternal Struggle*, *Risk*, chess, backgammon, and various PC and console games in addition to RPGs and CSGs.

Much like role-playing games, evenings filled playing CSGs were memorable. Three of the player networks I studied involved regular weekend game sessions that lasted into the middle of night or the next morning. Sleep was lost, but not always missed.

> I remember when I first started playing *Magic*, that was 1997 or so, and I went to this guy's house who'd invited me over to play. We'd go in at

> like 8 o'clock at night and stop at like 8 o'clock the next morning. We'd come out from this basement and it would be daylight. It was just brutal, but it was a lot of fun [P, interview].

Such sentiments were shared by many players, who considered the most enjoyable aspects of playing to be spending time with friends actively engaged in a shared fantasy they constructed together. Gamers who hosted late night or all-night sessions in their homes, store owners and game club officers did not perform organizational roles only for the status that such work brought (although they were given status by other gamers because of their official roles, which "proved" their love of games and their commitment to CSG subculture). Rather, they claimed to perform these roles because of their love for game and game culture.

Authentic Players Are Friendly and Fun

Whereas role-playing games provide opportunities for the development of "collective sociability" (Fine 1983:233), not everyone played *Magic* for such reasons. Gamers I interviewed drew an emic distinction between two different player types: recreational and competitive.

> I would say that I'm more recreational. You know, I don't like to lose, but it's a game and I play just to have fun and hang out with my friends and everything. And there's competitive people who get mad if you beat them, or they don't like to lose. There's [also] people that really get on my nerves ... they just make decks so they can beat people at *Magic*, and it's sort of like, you take all the fun of it by doing that [J, interview].

According to J, recreational players play for fun. They enjoy each others' company and look forward to the camaraderie associated with weekly gaming sessions. While sitting in a university center playing *Magic*, members of one player network were regularly approached by students who were attracted by gameplay. Almost every week, somebody would exclaim excitement at seeing us playing a game that they had given up when moving to college. Several of these gamers subsequently retrieved their *Magic* cards from home and joined our weekly games.

Some of these individuals turned out to be competitive players, a fact that many core recreational players in the network did not appreciate. "I enjoy playing with recreational players more than with competitive players just because they're usually nicer and they're not as strung out as the competitive players, who are worried about whether or not they're gonna lose" [J, interview]. Recreational players claimed that competitive players were too concerned with winning and lost sight of the fun of playing. "When highly competitive players come around to places where you play, you just get sort of a bad sense about them. [It's] like, this person is not

going to be any fun" [P, interview]. In other words, competitive players concentrated on establishing a status-identity in the group based on winning rather than on a subcultural identity based on having fun.

Several competitive players, who played for the "wrong reasons," were made to feel unwelcome by recreational players, who saw them as unwilling to allow others the chance to have fun. In interviews players told me that competitive players were unfriendly in their play.

> When you play somebody it's nice if somebody does something very effective, you may not be happy about it but you should at least compliment them. Like "good job, you just kicked my butt on that," versus the whole, "Ha I just ground your face into that and you suck." Just verbally abusive basically, a poor sport. Just being mean for the sake of being mean and demoralizing the other guy [K, interview].

Overall, there was a tension expressed between "playing" and "dueling," which affected players' statuses within local player networks. Most players (including me) really wanted to win games. Yet, players managed that desire and their presentation of self so that others labeled them neither as gloaters when they did win, nor as sore losers when they did not.

> Sometimes when a player wins, he gets excited and pokes fun at the losers—this seems to happen in multiplayer games. But in duels, both players are usually very civil. In duels, winners regularly say "I got lucky" while losers regularly look into their deck and say "Oh, just [one] more card[s] and I would have had you." There is thus a constant negotiation between not appearing smug and not appearing as a bad player. These players want to meet in the middle ... keep some consensus and friendliness ... not piss other players off [fieldnotes].

Fine (1983:200) conceptualizes a similar problem of "frame interpretation." A gamer is simultaneously a person and a player.[6] For collectible game players, the self is not divided between person versus player (see also Waskul, this volume), but rather the competitive self versus the recreational self. While the competitive self seeks to win the game and thus higher status, the recreational self must negotiate the "real world" expression of that winning attitude with his desire to "just have fun."

Authentic Players Share Their Wealth

> [A]nyone who tells you that price and collectibility are not important considerations when talking about Type 1 cards is just wrong. *Magic* cards are a collectible (in addition to being a great game) [sic] and we aren't going to mess that up by reprinting the "Power 9" no matter how many times or how many different ways we're asked to do it [Buehler 2003].

As Buehler makes clear, the rarity aspect of CSGs is their keystone and players regularly displayed their rare cards/figures to other players as

a way of expressing both their authenticity as subcultural insiders and their status vis-à-vis other players. When trading cards at retail game shops or club meetings, *Magic* players regularly display their most expensive cards on the first pages of their binders— notebooks filled with clear plastic sleeves that hold nine cards each (some players bring multiple binders with hundreds of cards each week). Similarly, when I first went to another *Mage Knight* player's home, he began his tour by showing me where he kept his rarest and most expensive figures. Displaying these rare items gives gamers credibility and status. In Bourdieian terms, the economic capital invested in these items is translated during interaction into cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986).

Such collections of rare and expensive items require monetary commitment to the game. Monetary commitment is expressed most often in mundane forms of consumption, as I regularly noted during my field research.

> Two guys from the local player network were at the *Mage Knight* tournament tonight, and each had brought his son to play. Normally these guys play, but I think it's nice that they're giving up their spots to let their sons play instead. After 2 hours of solid play, I finished the final round and went over to talk to them. I saw *Mage Knight* figures spread all over the table and the garbage can nearby was full of the little colored plastic containers in which the figures are packaged. I learned that they had bought about $50 total of booster packs while they waited on the tournament to end, hoping for an ultra rare figure. One guy had already bought more than $500 worth of the latest expansion; the other, $200 [fieldnotes].

The figures they were searching for in the booster packs would enable them to win more tournaments, thus increasing their objectified status in the collectible game subculture. But the figures also serve a much more irrational means of developing cultural identity as well. Both of these men regularly brought rare and expensive figures with them and openly invited newer players to borrow them for tournament play. When I started playing *Mage Knight*, these two advanced players offered, on separate occasions, to let me borrow unique figures that I did not own but needed to build competitive armies. The respect I gave them was not the result of any rational plan on their part to gain status by offering their figures, nor was it directly related to any objectified measure of status. Rather, they expressed an authentic subcultural identity through sharing the fruits of their conspicuous consumption, which leveled the playing field in an economic sense and allowed players to focus on their army-building and strategy skills. *Magic* players did something similar, offering to let people borrow decks of cards that they constructed themselves so that these players could participate in weekly multiplayer games. One particular player, V, brought thirty or forty constructed decks for play each week. When I

first began observing and playing in this network, he offered me decks with which to play when he saw that I did not own many Type 2 cards. In this way, I and other players who either could not or were not willing to make a high monetary commitment to the game could play.

Offering newer or less monetarily committed players figures/decks was also a form of recruitment, in which all of the gamers reported engaging. When new players entered local networks, advanced players often extended more than a temporary loan on items. In fact, advanced players gave me free cards and figures to help me get started when I was introduced to *Magic* and *Mage Knight*. Since both games require an initial investment to build up a basic set of cards/figures from which to construct decks/armies (about $15 for *Magic*; about $30 for *Mage Knight*), giving a new player a deck or army that is ready to play can make a significant difference in whether the new player becomes a regular player. The cards and figures that advanced players gave me were almost never rare or valuable, though a very few players did occasionally give away rare or unique items. Still, having a collection of common items with which to start is better than no deck/army at all.

Authentic Players Are Skilled Players

Collectible game designers work hard to ensure that games remain as balanced as possible given that rare/unique items are oftentimes very powerful relative to common items. Yet, regardless of game designers' desire for balance, some gamers have greater discretionary incomes than others and thus have greater access to the most powerful items. However, players' overemphasis on the monetary aspect of the game was seen by many as a subcultural *faux pas*. For those gamers with less ability or willingness to conspicuously consume cards/figures, their gaming skill was a powerful, alternative form of authenticity.

> It took me a while to realize it, but part of the big thrill of going out to these tournaments ... was the competition. Taking out people who were richer than me, that had more cards than me, that had been in it longer than me, and then whoopin' their ass. And it was just like winning a football game. It was that type of feeling except I didn't have to count on anybody else. It was just me [F, interview].

F, a working-class male who could not afford to buy heavily into new *Magic* expansions, found that he was able to beat many players who had expensive cards because they often lacked the skills necessary to craft a winning deck. He and other tournament players talked about the status they earned because they could enter tournaments with decks of relatively inexpensive common cards and still place in the top three at the end of the night. Implicitly they emphasized skill as a fundamental characteristic of "real" gamers.

Building winning decks takes time and effort. As players engage each other regularly to play, they develop a deeper understanding of game mechanics and begin to envision strategies for constructing and playing decks/armies. Unfortunately for players who love the strategic aspect of the game, many (especially younger) players rely heavily on news columnists and internet forums for tips on building powerful decks/armies. Wizards of the Coast's website and magazine, for example, regularly publish the content of championship-winning decks. Many players copied those decks and took them to local tournaments and social meetings to play.

> I sort of see the game as more strategy-based and you should, maybe not be good at strategy, but at least understand it to win. [...] It doesn't take any skill to go look up online which four cards, when put together, will give you an instant win. [...] That's all there is to it. I think it should it should be something that you have to work at more [K, interview].

Championship-winning decks are often based on an "infinite combo," a combination of a few cards that, when played together, result in an instant victory. Such combos do not sit well with players who cannot win against them, especially when the opponent did not think up the combo her/himself.

> One thing I do have a grudge against are particular players that go online and find deck ideas and [...] just copy the deck. It's like, why do you even play, because you're just copying other people's stuff, so there's no point in playing. [...] I couldn't do that because it would take all the enjoyment out of the game. Because it's not about beating people, it's about having your ideas come to life in a deck and to be able to, through proper strategy, beat an opponent, and not just "oh I have better cards than you" [J, interview].

Gamers who relied on powerful items to assure them of victory were seen as lacking the skills that made them "real" players. The advanced players regularly complained that *Magic* and *Mage Knight* tournaments were overrun with inexperienced players using "over-powered" decks. Though they might place well in tournaments, these players were not respected by older players. As my earliest *Mage Knight* fieldnotes reveal:

> While playing [*Mage Knight*], I told R that I'd watched E take four unique figures and wipe out an older guy, Q, who had about 15 figures, but no uniques (or maybe one). I also told R that I'd looked on Ebay and seen that some items go for a lot of money. R said, "well, that kid is M's son and gets whatever he wants or needs for the game. He builds 'cheese' armies. He puts the most powerful figures out on the field that nobody can touch. I mean, why even show up? If you know you can beat anything that shows up, why even play?" [fieldnotes].

Many (especially more experienced) players considered these players inauthentic because they relied on powerful cards/figures to play the game for them — they did not focus on developing their own skills. Donnelly and Young (1988) observed that the conspicuous display of equipment disappeared among climbers as they became more experienced. Similarly, as Wheaton (2000) discovered, "an antimaterialism ethos was evident from the windsurfers' attitudes to those individuals who purchased equipment they considered to be beyond their proficiency or who tried to demonstrate their subcultural membership or status just by displaying their equipment" (p. 263). The same processes seemed to occur in CSG subculture.

In sum, an "authentic" identity can be achieved through one's skills at strategizing a winning combination of cards/figures without relying on professionals for advice or money for the rarest items. Skilled gamers may also own the same powerful, rare items as the "copy cats" who continually relied on the same deck or army, but they did not play with those items every week. They constantly changed their decks and armies around, searching for new combinations that worked well together. They took risks with new ideas that did not always work, rather than sticking with the same army/deck design every week. Because of their love of gaming, their friendly attitudes toward and willingness to help out new players, and their focus on skill development, longtime gamers developed the sense that they were more "authentic" than some other gamers. Crucially, new players who expressed the same subcultural values and beliefs tended to be treated as authentic gamers from the beginning, while those that focused on the conspicuous consumption of game items did not.

Conclusion

More than a century ago, Thorstein Veblen (1899 [1992]) theorized that a new American bourgeois leisure class engaged in "conspicuous consumption" to define their social identity and status. Subsequent work by subcultural theorists also emphasized how people use consumption for purposes of social distinction (Bourdieu 1984; Hall and Jefferson 1976). In this chapter I have explored consumptive and expressive practices in CSG subculture, specifically in terms of its organizational and expressive dimensions. The dimensions noted are neither exhaustive nor complete. Studying how CSG subculture is codified into specific forms of social practice that mediate the relationship between individual actors and leisure industries serves two purposes. First, it avoids the limitations of relying solely on macro or micro perspectives. Instead, I have tried to emphasize the dialectic relationship between

the various cultural structures that constrain their behaviors, on the one hand, and the social psychology of gamers and their behaviors, on the other. Second, studying the cultural dimension of gaming shifts our attention from cause-and-effect models of culture to the process of consuming leisure itself (Butsch 1990).

While contemporary theories of consumption often depict the self as being rooted in conspicuous consumption, the data presented here illuminate more complex processes at work. Gamers *do* pay to play the games they love, and their identities are partially constructed through the commodities they consume. This consumption, however, is not deterministic. Instead, we can understand the complexity of CSG subculture by studying its organization and expressive dimensions. The ways in which game companies design and structure games and their rules, the organization of gameplay in terms of recreation and competition, the organization of game-related knowledge, and the conditions under which gamers may acquire items are all organizational aspects of the subculture that affect how players interact with games and with others in gaming environments.

The organizational dimension of the subculture is important to study because it highlights how CSGs are oriented toward consumption. This organizational structure is both similar to and yet different from many other leisure cultures. On the one hand, subcultural practices are often routinized at "sanctioned" gaming events (e.g., tournaments), just as many other game cultures—poker, bridge, or chess—cohere around organized events. Unlike poker, bridge, or even role-playing and video games, however, collectible game events are more likely to be organized at local retail stores that receive game support from game companies, thus enabling prearranged sets of interpersonal relationships and status hierarchies to be offered as commodities (Dayan 1986). The material role retail stores play in facilitating game play is crucial inasmuch as "leisure worlds depend for their existence and for their tensile strength on the presence of a social infrastructure and on the ability to distribute resources that members desire" (Fine 1989:322). In addition, the constant revision of rules and game mechanics, as well as the existence of subcultural media and markets, all come together to nurture the constant consumption of game items.

The expressive dimension of gaming subculture is equally important. The feelings players express about gaming, how they relate to and treat other players, the ways in which players use and share game products, and their emphasis on skills all offer counter arguments to claims that subcultural selves are reducible to consumer products. Giddens (cited in Warde 1994) argues that choice is a crucial feature of self-identity. For gamers, having a choice in how they identify with and play CSGs is key to their

continued participation in the subculture. Gamers' identities can be understood in terms of authenticity, a concept that looks beyond conspicuous consumption. Authenticity, however, is not an objectively "real" phenomenon. It a social construction through which some gamers increase in status relative to others. For players of CSGs, that authenticity is embedded within a complex web of subcultural ideas, objects and practices.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank the participants of the Georgia Workshop on Culture and Institutions—particularly Liz Cherry, Jim Dowd, David Smilde, and Erin Winter—for their useful feedback on a early draft of the chapter.

References

Alongi, Anthony. 2003. "Before You Bust Those Packs ..." Retrieved Nov. 9th, 2004 (*http://www.wizards.com/default.asp?x=Magiccom/daily/aa83*).

Altheide, David L. 2000. "Identity and the Definition of the Situation in a Mass-Mediated Context." *Symbolic Interaction* 23(1):1–27.

Avedon, Elliott M., and Brian Sutton-Smith. 1971. "Games Used for Recreative Purposes." pp. 239–246 in*The Study of Games*, edited by Elliott M. Avedon and Brian Sutton-Smith. New York: Wiley.

Beck, Ulrich. 1992. *Risk Society*. London: Sage.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, translated by Richard Nice. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

_____. 1986. "The Forms of Capital." pp. 241–258 in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, edited by John G. Richardson. New York: Greeenwood Press.

Buehler, Randy. 2003. "Classic Developments: Type 1 Restrictions and Supercollectibles." Retrieved Jul. 7th, 2004 (*http://www.wizards.com/default.asp?x=mtgcom/daily/rb102*).

Butsch, Richard. 1990. "Leisure and Hegemony in America." pp. 3–27 in *For Fun and Profit: The Transformation of Leisure into Consumption*, edited by Richard Butsch. Philadelphia, Temple University Press.

Csikszentmihalyi, Mihalyi, and Eugene Rochberg-Halton. 1981. *The Meaning of Things*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press.

Dayan, Daniel. 1986. "Copyrighted Subcultures." *American Journal of Sociology* 91(5): 1219–1228.

Donnelly, Peter, and Kevin Young. 1988. "The Construction and Confirmation of Identity in Sport Subcultures." *Sociology of Sport Journal* 5(3): 223–240.

Fine, Gary Alan. 1983. *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

_____. 1989. "Mobilizing Fun: Provisioning Resources in Leisure Worlds." *Sociology of Sport Journal* 6(4): 319–334.

Garfield, Richard. 1995. "Notes from the Designer." pp. A1–A13 in *Magic the Gathering: The Pocket Players' Guide*, edited by Rich Redman and Eric Doohan. Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast.

Giddens, Anthony. 1991. *Modernity and Self-Identity*. Cambridge: Polity.

Griswold, Wendy. 1994. *Cultures and Societies in a Changing World.* Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press.
Granow, Jukka, and Alan Warde (eds.). 2001. *Ordinary Consumption.* London: Routledge.
Hall, Stuart, and Tony Jefferson (eds.). 1976. *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain.* London: Hutchinson.
Hine, Thomas. 2002. *I Want That! How We All Became Shoppers.* New York: Harper Collins.
Hodkinson, Paul. 2002. *Goth: Identity, Style and Subculture.* Oxford: Berg.
Marcuse, Herbert. 1966 [2002]. *One Dimensional Man.* London: Routledge.
Owens, Thomas, and Diana Helmer. 1996. *Inside Collectible Card Games.* Brookfield, CT: Millbrook Press.
Paxson, E. W. 1971. "War Gaming." pp. 278–301 in *The Study of Games*, edited by Elliott M Avedon and Brian Sutton-Smith. New York: Wiley.
Storey, John. 1996. *Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Culture: Theories and Methods.* Athens: University of Georgia Press.
Tankel, Jonathan, and Keith Murphy. 1998. "Collecting Comic Books: A Study of the Fan and Curatorial Consumption." pp. 55–68 in *Theorizing Fandom: Fans, Subculture and Identity*, edited by Cheryl Harris and Alison Alexander. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
Thomas, W. I. 1923. *The Unadjusted Girl.* Boston: Little, Brown, and Co.
Thornton, Sarah. 1995. *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital.* Cambridge: Polity Press.
van Leeuwen, Theo. 2005. "Discourses of Choice." Presented at the Georgetown Linguistics Society 2005 Student Conference, Washington, DC.
Veblen, Thorstein. 1899[1992]. *The Theory of the Leisure Class.* New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.
Warde, Alan. 1994. "Consumption, Identity-Formation and Uncertainty." *Sociology* 28(4): 877–898.
Waskul, Dennis D. 2006. "The Role-Playing Game and the Game of Role-Playing: The Ludic Self and Everyday Life." *Gaming as Culture: Social Reality, Identity and Experience in Fantasy Games*, edited by J. Patrick Williams, Sean Q. Hendricks, and W. Keith Winkler. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.
Wheaton, Belinda. 2000. "'Just Do It': Consumption, Commitment, and Identity in the Windsurfing Subculture." *Sociology of Sport Journal* 17: 254–274.
Williams, J. Patrick. 2004. "Authentic Identities: Straightedge, Music and the Internet." Presented at the Southern Sociological Society annual meeting in Atlanta, GA.
_____, and Heith Copes. 2005. "How Edge Are You? Constructing Authentic Identities and Subcultural Boundaries in a Straightedge Internet Forum." *Symbolic Interaction* 28(1)67–89.
Willis, Paul. 1990. *Common Culture: Symbolic Work at Play in the Everyday Cultures of the Young.* Boulder: Westview Press.
Wizards of the Coast, 2004. "Magic Arena League: Nothing Beats It." Retrieved Nov. 9th, 2004 (*http://www.wizards.com/default.asp?x=events/magic/arena*).
WizKids. 2003. *Mage Knight: Complete Rules of Play.* Bellevue, WA: WizKids.
_____. 2004. "What Is a Combat Dial?" Retrieved Nov. 20th, 2004 (*http://www.wizkidsgames.com/mageknight/article.asp?frame=howtoplay&cid=36912*).

Notes

1. I use the term "authentic" here in quotations to mark it as suspect. The reason for this is that many subculture researchers assume the objectivity of authenticity, assigning the labels "insiders" and "outsiders" as if they were real. I do not consider authenticity as real or objective, but as a social construction. Competing definitions of authenticity (or authentic identity) exist in every subculture. A dominant definition will arise through interaction among members who share a vision of the ideal subcultural member. Therefore, any definition of authenticity will have certain criteria that must be met. Those who do not meet the criteria tend to get marginalized or excluded from subcultural networks—they are called poseurs, pretenders, or wannabes.

2. I use the third-person pronoun "he" throughout the chapter when referring to participants because everyone I observed and interviewed was male. This should not suggest the absence of females from the subculture, but it should suggest how rare female players are. The reasons for this rarity are beyond the scope of this chapter.

3. In *Magic*, cards are divided in three rarity categories: common, uncommon and rare. In *Mage Knight*, there are six rarity categories: common, uncommon, rare, very rare, super rare, and ultra rare.

4. As the Wizards of the Coast website (Alongi 2003) explains: "How it works: Sealed [draft event] gives you a special pack of a large set and one booster each of the subsequent two expansions. Booster draft has each player (recommend 6 or 8) open one pack at a time, pick one card, and pass to the left (first and third packs ... pass right on the second pack). In both cases, you have to build the best 40-card minimum deck you can from whatever you get."

5. Doing random searches on Ebay, I regularly found more than 30,000 auctions related to *Magic* cards and more than 8,000 related to WizKids' collectible figures (including *Mage Knight*, *MechWarrior*, and *Heroclix*).

6. According to early rulebooks: "*Magic* is a game of battle in which you and your opponents represent powerful sorcerers attempting to drive each other from the lands of Dominia. Your deck holds your tools: creatures, land, spells, and artifacts...." Thus, similar to role-playing gamers, *Magic* and *Mage Knight* players are expected to assume at some level an in-game persona. This persona, however, is not nearly as complex as those developed among role-playing gamers and is typically not salient during play.