From the Web to the Woods: Connecting the Online to the Offline in Consumers’ Play

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This paper presents an ongoing study of the interfaces between online and offline activities enacted by consumers in playful contexts. Employing ethnography and netnography, I investigate a community of individuals who play geocaching, an increasingly popular game that involves technology and outdoor adventure. Emergent themes suggest that, while articulating their incursions between the online and offline realms involved in playing geocaching, players engage in escape to and from nature, and construct the game as a collective enterprise based on the interplay of individual experiences.

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Current perspectives on play define it as “situational and reliant not simply on abstract rules but also on social networks, attitudes, or events in one’s non-game life, technological abilities or limits, structural affordances or limits, local cultures, and personal understandings of leisure.” (Taylor 2006, p.156). Despite several efforts directed at defining and exploring different dimensions of play (Grayson 1999; Deighton & Grayson 1995; Holbrook 1994), consumer researchers have focused mainly on the intrinsic motivations of play and the role of marketers in defining playful experiences (Kozinets et al. 2004). We have limited knowledge about other environmental and social conditions that interfere with consumers’ playful activities. In this paper, I propose that two major concepts have been overlooked in their relation to play: technology and community.

The rapid expansion of technologies of information and communication promoted major social changes during the last decades (Mick & Fournier 1998). While previous studies have assessed the impact of technology in consumer agency (Kozinets et al. 2004); self-presentation (Schau & Gilly 2003), and dissatisfaction (Ward & Ostrom 2006), the interfaces between technology and play have received partial attention only. Extant theory develops in two streams: play in offline environments (Martin 2004, Holt 1995, Arnould & Price 1993), and online games studies (Mathwick & Rigdon 2004). Attempts to compare both realms have developed in cultural studies and sociology, suggesting that video games and online games share purpose that are similar. However, manifestations of nature in these two types of worlds may be essentially different. The offline environment can be perceived through all senses. It can be seen and heard, smelled, tasted, and touched. In such environments, players are subject to weather variations and their actions are usually limited to the capacities of their physical bodies. The offline world is one of potentially risky situations where there is constant need to engage all senses in order to cope with the environment (Dreyfus 2001, Tuan 1998). Cyberspace, in contrast, is perceived as “physically safe”, decontextualized and aseptic (Wellman & Gulia 1999). While the efforts made so far to understand the particularities of each realm are noteworthy, we lack empirical accounts of the interfaces between the online and offline, technology and nature, in play-related activities enacted by consumers.

I complement prior research by investigating consumer practices in a playful context that involves online and offline activities: geocaching. Geocaching is an increasingly popular game played with the use of GPS devices. Frequently defined as a high-tech version of treasure hunting, it combines technology with outdoor adventure. The basic rule is that individuals hide small containers anywhere in the world and share the geographic coordinates of these caches on the Internet. Players plan a hunt by choosing from a list of caches and their locations on a public website. They download the coordinates to their GPS devices and use them to get to the place where the cache is hidden. When finding a cache, players are asked to sign the notebook, take something from the cache and leave something else to replace what they have taken. When the hunt is over, it is reported on the same website and credit is gained from each cache found. The website geocaching.com has registered over 500,000 players in more than a hundred countries and more than 837,500 active caches worldwide since 2000 (Groundspeak.com).

This investigation of geocaching is an ongoing study initiated in June 2008. I combine netnography (Kozinets 2002) with traditional ethnographic techniques to study geocachers’ online and offline activities. I have conducted interviews with geocachers and participant observation in multiple online and offline sites. I gathered field notes, pictures, as well as archival data in the form of podcasts, media texts, and forum discussions.

Preliminary results indicate that the combination of multiple technologies with outdoor activities, nature, and travel attracts and brings together into geocaching individuals in order to diverse backgrounds, profiles, and motivations. As technology and nature are essential to the game, players need to articulate their incursions into these two apparently opposite fields. While outdoors exploration resonates with the antique “back to nature” sentiment, technology allows for control and safety within the wild and unfamiliar world of nature.

Players also switch between online and offline in order to negotiate the rules of the game, monitor competition, and integrate playful experiences into the space and time of everyday life. It is through online interaction, secured by nicknames and avatars, that players share stories about their hunts for a particular cache, reconstructing them as fantastic, collective experiences. This penetration of offline play into the online realm eventually strengthens the bonds among players and reinforces the communal aspects of play, hence suggesting a fundamental role for technology in shaping communities of play.

These preliminary themes, combined to the growing interest on the communal aspects of consumption (Muniz & O’Guinn 2001) and the increasing pervasiveness of play in current north-American society (Ackerman 1999) suggest that consumer researchers could gain much from an advanced understanding of the communal aspects of play. Although observing that “humans will find community where they will” (Muniz & Schau 2005, p. 746), consumer researchers have recently investigated communities that are mainly related to brands, branded products and the market in general (e.g. Muniz & Schau 2005, Kozinets 2002). Future studies should explore the possibility that play is the central link that brings a community together, helping us understand when and how play and consumption are co-constituted, and extending our knowledge about what sorts of side roles brands and consumption play in constituting communities of practice.

References
Drawing Association Rules between Purchases and In-Store Behavior: An Extension of the Market Basket Analysis

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Actual observation of shopping behaviors is rarely conducted in marketing research. Behavior is often inferred with a more easily measurable output: purchases. Market Basket Analysis (MBA) is one of many techniques used to study shopping behavior through purchases. It aims to identify the associations between product categories based on purchases performed in these categories. Specifically, it answers the following question: if a consumer buys an item from category A, is he more likely to buy an item from category B?

Though this technique is very popular, it has an important limitation. MBA measures associations between categories by using purchases. However, categories may be too closely related in terms of interest that consumers take in, without exhibiting strong purchase associations. To detect such associations not based on purchases, it is necessary to observe actual in-store behavior: the shoppers’ paths through the store, the way they behave within product categories to observe shelves, handle products and examine them. This may reveal consumers’ interests for product categories.

Using a new data collection allowing to precisely record and time-stamp shoppers’ moves and gestures, we extend the classical MBA by integrating in-store physical behavior in the analysis: we draw associations not only from purchases but also from actual in-store behavior. We compare results of our new method with classical MBA results and show a significant improvement.

From purchase associations to behavioral associations

MBA was at first developed in a brick-and-mortar environment. Associations between categories were computed using panel data. Given that the MBA’s practicality, it has known a rapid development. Managers consider it as a useful tool to manage cross-promotions or to develop loyalty programs. Researchers use this technique to study multi-category purchase decisions.

MBA has then been used to study cross-buying on the Internet. However, Internet data has an important difference from panel data: it is not limited to purchase behavior. Navigation data is also available, such as web-pages that are viewed, products that are examined, or specific attributes that are investigated. Research uses it to make associations between categories not only based on purchases, but also...