"This emphasis on extravaganza, simulation, and implosion draws consumers into a web of secular sport-oriented sacraments that loom in a larger-than-life liminal state . . ."

BEING IN THE ZONE

Staging Retail Theater at ESPN Zone Chicago

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Experiential consumption is a topic of growing interest in the social scientific and managerial literatures. While consumer experience is profoundly shaped by the built environment, a critical eye has been cast on the oppressive nature of themed environments. While offering multisensory sensual opportunities, themed retail environments cater primarily to the visual impulse and have been theorized to both direct and misdirect attention in ways beneficial to marketers. In this ethnography of the servicescape of ESPN Zone Chicago, the ways in which retail theater encourages consumers to animate a themed sporting venue and the ways consumers respond to these cultural prompts are explored. The authors explore the instrumental relationship between retail space and consumer experience in themed environments and attend to the interrelated role of the visual, the sacred, brand, mass media, and sport. Conclusions find that consumers watch marketers in these spaces as much as marketers watch consumers—a finding termed obverse panopticism.

I come here to watch the games. I first come to eat, and then I come to watch. It's a way to escape, release tension . . . the traffic, the tension at work . . . to have fun. The major reason is I like sports. I bring my clients and vendors. There's something to capture anyone's attention. . . . I stay with them though. ESPN Zone makes me want to come back again. . . . You know, I'm a man and it's a sports place. I bring females to this place to eat. It's up to the female to decide if we play games.

—"Thomas," male, early thirties,
African American, computer network consultant

The place makes me feel different. . . . Chuck E. Cheese. It's like I'm in a grown up Chuck E. Cheese. I feel uninhibited, free, and not so much concerned about things going on around.

—"Veronica," female, Caucasian, late twenties

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> It's a cool place to work . . . you know, not too stressful. It's not like being on a product line and having to produce pieces of something. People come and leave with a smile. I love my colleagues. Everyone doesn't act the same. Everyone has their own style. My style is to be the funny-man . . . to crack jokes and interact with folks. I tell them [customers] they look like different celebrities. After all, people come here and want to eat, drink, watch and play . . . that's our logo you know [big smile].
>
> —"Claudio," male, early twenties,
> African American, ESPN Zone employee

These informant quotes suggest some of the complex dynamics of the retail experience at ESPN Zone Chicago that this article will explore.[1] A 35,000-square-foot retail complex owned and operated by entertainment conglomerate Walt Disney Company, ESPN Zone Chicago debuted on July 10, 1999, as the second of five current retail locations. Building on its unrivalled experience in theme park design, Disney's imagineers have produced a sports and entertainment experience containing important implications for our understanding of contemporary consumption.

ESPN Zone and themed retail environments fit into a stream of theoretic scholarship that has critically examined the exploitative corporate intensification of unreality in society. Building on ideas originally articulated by Frankfurt School scholars Adorno and Horkheimer (e.g., Horkheimer and Adorno 1972), Debord (1983) explored the "society of the spectacle" in terms of corporate entities' exploiting consumer desire to maintain a relentlessly oppressive and inescapable industrial order that entices cooperation through desire rather than through threat

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(what is termed, in critical theory parlance, a hegemony). In Debord's view, society has become so enchanted by the overpowering glitz and glamour of the spectacular that everyday reality is undermined and devalued. While occasionally less critical and more celebratory than Debord (Firat and Venkatesh 1995), Baudrillard (1994) built on Debord's theme of the society of the spectacle by theorizing that we live in a society in which the unreal is celebrated and elevated above the real. Baudrillard identified Disneyland as a quintessential example of what he termed "hyperreality." Baudrillard argued that the theming of Disneyland indicates that nothing is real. Extending this nihilism, he believed that "the real is no longer real," fantasy inexorably replaces reality, and themed places such as Disneyland are there to conceal this fact (pp. 12-13). The common element to these theories is the oppression of consumers by corporations using entertainment and spectacle that confuse reality and unreality.

Alternately, modern business writers have taken a much more positive view of the prevalence of entertainment across the economy. Entertainment consultant Michael Wolf (1999) theorized that entertainment "is fast becoming the driving wheel of the new world economy" (p. 4). He also noted that "the lines between entertainment and not-entertainment are disappearing" (p. 51). Replacing the word *entertainment* with *fantasy*, *unreality,* or *spectacle* thus yields a hypothesis not significantly different from that of Horkheimer, Debord, or Baudrillard. However, Wolf saw entertainment as a form of almost-inevitable technological-industrial progress (he deprecatingly describes China, India, and the Islamic nations as "the underscreened, undermalled, still-waiting-for-cable world" [p. 15]). Furthermore, he viewed entertainment as a source of common interests and, thus, community (p. 38). The predominance of entertainment fits perfectly into a society in which time is scarce and in which "shopping" itself has becomes "a leisure activity" (p. 61). Perhaps most fundamentally, he described entertainment as a vital and necessary balm addressing the "emotional needs" of modern life (p. 36). Unlike Debord and Baudrillard, Wolf saw the increase in entertainment and spectacle as fulfilling a genuine consumer need, being driven by marketplace demands for more leisure, community, and escapist relaxation. According to Wolf, the themed environment is an increasingly important place in which this demand is fulfilled.

In perhaps no other area is spectacle more dramatically purveyed to customers than in the theming of retail spaces. As Lefebvre ([1976] 1991, 21) has noted, capitalism achieves its remarkable success and growth in part by way of the manner in which it occupies and produces "a space." Production of the profit-marking space of spectacle has increasingly permeated and influenced commercial and retail marketing efforts. Themed malls, themed parks, themed hotels, and, of course, themed restaurants are but a few examples of arenas influenced by the urge to theme. Businesses like the Hard Rock Café and Planet Hollywood were among the first to offer unique dining experiences that melded entertainment experiences—with their attendant allusions of wealth and fantasy—with the experience of dining out. As with the critical theorists of the past, current cultural studies literature on theming opine that this tendency may be a harmful one (Gottdeiner 1997). By focusing and constricting the topics used for social fantasies, themed environments can reduce open discourse and lessen the opportunities for developing an informed public sphere. However, it is crucial to note that resistant readings of these environments are inevitable "because their design allows for a variety of personal interpretations" (Gottdeiner 1997, 158). More systematic empirical investigation of consumer experience is required to shed additional light on these principles of accommodation and resistance, especially as the volume of managerial literature on the manipulation of consumer experience rapidly increases (Pine and Gilmore 1999; Schmitt 1999). Our study of ESPN Zone Chicago is intended to explore the ways in which the instrumental economic relationship between retail space and consumer experience play out and are masked by the themed environment.

Our interpretation is grounded in philosophical inquiry into the phenomenon of scopophilia, that is, the pleasure derived from looking. The vision-centered orientation of Western cultures is widely acknowledged. The scopic (visually centered) drive has been captured—from the French theorists of desire such as Lacan, Sartre, Foucault, and Baudrillard (Jay 1988, 1999) through contemporary consumer researchers (Falk 1997)—by the notion of "the gaze." The gaze has been variously characterized in terms of power dynamics, identity politics, and erotic energy, as well their interpenetration (for example, in Foucault's [1995] panopticon). Our consumer research literature has

explored the practice of cognitive acquisition but has sleighted the complex sensual and emotional dimensions attending this practice (Joy and Sherry 2000; Sherry 1995). Of the various scopic regimes theorized to date, none adequately accounts for the tacking between constraint and abandon of the gaze of the consumer at play in a field of larger-than-life mass media images. ESPN Zone is a site awash in images that consumers read both with and against the grain; consumers use these images to weave an experiential fabric that may confirm or confound managerial intent or be contrapuntal to it altogether. In this ethnography of a site designed specifically to incite play, we follow closely the consumer's gaze.

In addition, this article pays considerable attention to several other topics important to contemporary consumer research and cultural studies. Ritzer (1999) has described the "new means of consumption" (NMC) as a spectacular social environment that is treated by its participants as sacred and transforming. However, Ritzer found this social form to be oppressive and exploitative. Our study attends to the sacred and transformational aspects of the NMC but empirically explores the extent and nature of the oppression they enact. Like Horkheimer and Adorno (1972) and Debord (1983), Ritzer framed the themed environment as an occasion of false consciousness and hegemonic domination. In contrast, Wolf's (1999) thesis suggested that the "entertainmentizing" of themed retail is accelerating because it satisfies an innate need.

By attending to the role of the mass media and branding in the venture of theming, our investigation will attempt to view the trend toward increasingly themed environments by attending to each of these apparently contradictory notions. In particular, we address in some depth the ease with which a sporting ethos accommodates to such paradox. Finally, we explore the role of architecture in consumer experience, developing the conceptualization of "hestial" buildings in context (Casey 1993). Consumer experience in these environments, as it turns out, is both enriched and impoverished, liberated and constrained (Peñaloza 1999, Sherry 1998). We explore these implications ethnographically by examining the thematic structuring of ESPN Zone's physical space. In the following pages, we sketch the managerial backdrop to our field site, discuss the frameworks and methods informing our study, take the reader on a walking tour of the built environment, and offer an interpretation of the retail theatrics that animate ESPN Zone Chicago.

METHOD

Over the past two decades, consumer researchers have employed ethnographic field methods to investigate consumer experiences and meanings within servicescapes (Bitner 1992) as diverse as malls (Csaba 1999; Sandikci and Holt 1998; Miller et al. 1998), company stores (Peñaloza 1999; Sherry 1998), swap meets (Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988), flea markets (Sherry 1990), wilderness locations (Arnould and Price 1993; Arnould, Price, and Otnes 1999; Price, Arnould, and Tierney 1994; Arnould, Price, and Tierney 1998), gift stores (Sherry and McGrath 1989), religious theme parks (O'Guinn and Belk 1989), subcultural gatherings (Belk and Costa 1998; McAlexander and Schouten 1998; Schouten and McAlexander 1995) and cybermarketscapes (Fischer 1999; Venkatesh 1998). Extending this tradition, we focused our study of ESPN Zone—a venue that blends these other types—on consumer experience unfolding in the setting. Our goal is to capture the experience of "being in ESPN Zone" in as much richness and detail as possible and, at the same time, to assume a holistic outlook. This leads us to emphasize both the complexities of consumer experience and the importance of the retail context in which they unfold (Bitner 1990, 1992; Grove and Fisk 1983; Rubin and Rubin 1995).

We deployed a research team approach that allowed for inquiry from multiple perspectives. Our multicultural research team consisted of three males and three females, ranging in age from early twenties to late forties. The article is based on four months of formal field immersion during which time we employed participant observation and conducted interviews with management, staff, and customers. We followed an emergent design and used wide sampling criteria to capture as many different experiences and perspectives as possible. Field data were recorded in field notes, audiotapes, and photographs. On-site data collection was enhanced and refined via weekly strategy meetings during which ongoing analyses of themes and issues were discussed. We employed other standard procedures such as constant comparison and member checking. To date, our interpretation is grounded in encounters with more than five hundred informants. We cover some of this ground in the ethnography that follows.

A note on our multicultural, bi-gender, intergenerational teamwork is in order. Field data were collected by inquirers as individuals and as members of dyads and triads; larger groups were presumed to create impediments to collection, although all researchers were, on occasion,

on site simultaneously and could coordinate their efforts accordingly. Real-time collaboration in data collecting improved the observational, eliciting, and analytic skills of each researcher, helping make field time more productive. Our individual differences led us to encounter not only more but also different types of informants, and hence consumer experiences, than would have been possible for a single researcher. We worked with males and females of various ages, with native Chicagoan consumers from a variety of subcultures, and with tourists from a host of countries. We inquired into (among other issues) the gendering of space, the cultural ethos of sport, the occupational stratification by social class and group, and the interplay between embodied and virtual reality. These inquiries benefited enormously from perspectives brought to bear by teammates who were either female, from a culture other than the United States, "jocks" or "ex-jocks" (or, indeed, "antijocks"), "techies" or technophobes, or members of a domestic Chicagoan subculture. Each of us had the opportunity to make the strange seem familiar and the familiar strange for other members of the team. Our strategy sessions quickly moved from examination of critical incidents to negotiation of interpretations of the incidents, heightening the team's experience-distance (or etic) sensitivity to culturally embedded or experience-intimate (emic) issues (see Arnould and Wallendorf 1994 for details). Multiple perspectives allowed us to be critical, comprehensive, and holistic in our data collection and analysis.

INTO THE ZONE

ORIENTING TO THE SITE: THE ESPN BRAND OF SPORTS

ESPN Zone is the thematic retail offshoot of the Entertainment and Sports Programming Network (ESPN), one of the earliest of the many successful cable networks to specialize in a particular type of programming. The brainchild of Bill Rasmussen, former public relations director of the New England Whalers hockey team, ESPN began broadcasting on September 7, 1979, in the small town of Bristol, Connecticut, on a tiny budget (Freeman 2000). The concept of the network was simple: a sports news network expressing an uncompromising and irreverent sports fanaticism (Freeman 2000; Rasmussen 1983; Wolf 1999). This

fanaticism played out in twenty-four-hour coverage of (then) off-beat sports events, such as Australian Rules football, kick boxing, and early NCAA basketball tournament rounds.

ESPN's management, broadcasters, and sportscasts reflected a blue-collar sensibility, a lower budget yet cutting-edge, tongue-in-cheek, sports-obsessed tone that appealed to the sports hardcore. Working this appealing new tone, ESPN has become America's premiere source of sports news programming, a powerhouse brand that has translated extremely well to the Internet realm. In fact, ESPN Zone began life as a Web site, evolving in one direction to its bricks-and-mortar physical locations around the country and in another as the revamped Web site ESPN.com (Freeman 2000). The Horatio Algeresque, underdog, entrepreneurial spirit of the cable startup was another important aspect of the network, whose corporate cultural cachet diminished as it grew to epitomize cable network success (Rasmussen 1983). In 1998, ESPN reported a $600 million net profit, more than that of all three of the major broadcast networks combined. ESPN was successively acquired by Capital Cities, ABC, and, most recently (in 1995), by the Walt Disney Corporation. By 1999, the network reached more than 76 million homes in the United States and was heard in twenty-one languages overseas (Fay 1999).

Given its core competencies at brand building, it may be unsurprising that Disney's management recognized the commercial potential of ESPN's powerful brand and set out to franchise its mystique through high-profile brand extensions such as new cable channels, theme park additions, a magazine, and ESPN Zone. Considered an institution, the Walt Disney Company possesses a corporate culture exquisitely focused on the creation and management of fantasy-oriented brands and their extension into multiple modalities of consumer experience. Our observations of ESPN Zone employees suggest that their training fit them precisely into the nexus of Disney's powerful corporate culture. Some employees bow toward ESPN's Bristol origins, others toward Disney's Orlando nexus; feelings of allegiance or belonging to ESPN or Disney run strong. ESPN Zone employees—or, as Disney terms them, "cast members"—share the same linguistic terms and the same mission- critical focus on guest satisfaction as their coworkers at The Magic Kingdom ("guest" is Disney terminology for customer). ESPN Zone's location on the Disney organizational chart as an offshoot of the theme park division, and its larger-than-life "rides" suggest that

Disney's managers view ESPN Zone as a particular brand of theme park.

Of particular relevance to our present study are characterizations of ESPN as being culturally ubiquitous and unabashedly male centered. Zealous licensing efforts have even been exerted to brand the on-air catch phrases that ESPN's talent (its celebrities) is renowned for injecting into the lexicon of everyday speech (Freeman 2000). The development and commercialization of memes is surely at the frontier of experiential marketing (memes are distinct cultural elements, such as a particular fashion or catch phrases; see Blackmore 1999; Dawkins 1976). Beyond ESPN's sheer branded presence, the volume and frequency of its sports news coverage make it a part of the cultural ecosystem through which consumers move. For many, it is a principal contributor to the mass mediation of experience. Furthermore, the exuberant ethos of its corporate culture—producers billing themselves as "the gods of sport"—is tinged with allegations of sexism, racial discrimination, and macho egotism that, combined with the pressure of deadline stress and a reputation for micromanagement, serves to alienate even as it engulfs viewers (Freeman 2000). The network might be said to simultaneously epitomize and exaggerate the male-centered aura of sport in the United States. While the ESPN Zone Chicago general manager describes his operation as *"3-D ESPN"* (a kind of imagineered sports world), our study suggests that consumers' experience is far broader than this belief.

ENTERING THE SITE

ESPN Zone is situated just off the southern edge of the "Magnificent Mile," the stretch of North Michigan Avenue often called the "Boule Mich" for its resemblance to a fashionable Parisienne shopping district (Figure 1). It is part of Chicago's bustling North Bridge district. The building is flanked by a hotel and the flagship brand stores of Virgin Records, Eddie Bauer, and Harley Davidson, as well as a sports-themed parking garage and a huge Cineplex Odeon. Two themed attractions—Disney Quest and the Eerie World Cafe—abut the building on the east, while Chicago fixtures such as Pizzeria Uno's and the Medinah Temple lie just to the west. Several restaurants dot the area as well. Automobile and pedestrian traffic is heavy and loud. Many languages mingle on the sidewalks. A variety of music spills out onto the street

FIGURE 1: ESPN Zone Chicago

from the storefronts, and an aromatic blend of Asian spices often wafts on the breeze.

The field site itself is set off from the street by a set of iron railings, whose decorative appeal does not discourage pedestrians from using them as perches; consumers often rest between venues on these rails or sit and observe the passersby. Vivid banners are suspended from tall iron columns at curbside, providing a bit of local color as well as the illusion of a museum/stadium hybrid associated with the site. The facade of the building is dominated by a dramatic series of window displays that wrap around the corner, drawing spectators from both axes of approach. Each window display is constructed in the form of a collage, and each gives prospective visitors a sensuous sampling of the experiences to be enjoyed inside the store. Among the tableaux are caricatures of midwestern "American-ness" and stereotypically gendered athleticism and stylized renderings of (anonymous) Chicago athletes. There are frame-bursting depictions of athletes leaping from inside the television into the fan's living room (upsetting the chips of a flannel-clad, La-Z-Boy-bound viewer in the process) as well as portrayals of neon footballs broadcast from satellite dishes and house roofs replete with receiving dishes. A Rube Goldberg fantasy is depicted in the display of

footballs compressed into their essential essence and bellows forced through plumbing to be dispensed through ray guns. ESPN edit cards are displayed as movie chop blocks ("Zone Patrons . . . Take 23!") and convey a sense of the stagecraft underlying the venue. Theatrical bits of Chicagoana, miniature kleig lights, and primitive depictions of fandom reinforce this impression: merchandising displays of money tucked into giftware and ESPN magazine covers are arrayed, poster like, as window treatments. Browsers often shop these busy windows without entering the building at all, as they might the Christmas windows of nearby Marshall Fields. The windows have the same visual appeal as the peepholes and viewing slots that afford sidewalk superintendents access to restricted construction sites. Our informants, however, gaze in on a metaphysical construction project.

The corporate logo is emblazoned over the doorway. A green hemisphere supports the ESPN Zone brand name, and a hemisphere of stylized fire surmounts it. The giant sphere seems planetary, as if signaling that this place is a distinctive world in itself. Yet, there is otherworldliness, too, in the presence of fire that might cause one to wonder if this paradise were also an inferno. Encoded here is a metaphorical allusion to the ESPN network's stock tag phrase, "En Fuego" (Spanish for "on fire"). En fuego is indicative of momentum, of being on a roll, or, as informants note, of being *"in the zone."* The *Z* in the logo's Zone is typographically exaggerated to resemble a lightning bolt. This bolt of kinetic energy (whether linked to *"Zeus"* or *"Zorro"*) provides psychic benefit both immediate and mythic. The lightning-like *Z* promotes the potential energy resident in couch-potato-dom (and also may be mentally linked to the implied *"La-Z-Boy"*). Coexisting with this sedentary association is the promise of transportation and transformation. Satellite dishes flank the logo, promising the impeccable wonders of global high tech, the reception of sporting events everywhere. Taken together, ESPN Zone's corporate logo conveys a set of a sense of movement and transformation, technological and carnal (technocarnal) delights, a utopia or dystopia that is both landscape and mindscape (and also nostalgic and related to television, causing some consumers to hearken back from ESPN Zone to *The Twilight Zone*).

A large neon digital clock face offsets the doorway, informing visitors precisely (as precision has become a hallmark of sport), to the fraction of a decimal, of their temporal status. It is as if to remind them that in life, as in sport, time is rapidly running out. According to one inform-

ant (an African American male in his mid-thirties who lives in Chicago and works as a marketing researcher), *"when I see it [the clock], I am reminded that time is precious, as if to say that there is a certain amount of time here at ESPN Zone, so enjoy it."* The juxtaposition of precise clock time and utopian geography may invite consumer contemplation on mortality, reality, and other philosophical matters. Immediately above the doorway, a digital running banner displays up-to-the-minute sports headlines, resembling a big-board ticker display of stock quotes.[2] Finally, mounted high above each of the front windows, an enormous skewer pierces an assortment of sports balls. This "ball kebab" works metaphorically and metonymically to alert visitors not only to the food-and-game bill of fare but also to the male-centered marinade that flavors this servicescape experience.

Greeters from ESPN Zone stand in the entranceway, answering the questions of passersby, giving directions to errant tourists, redirecting peddlers and homeless persons, and occasionally deflecting the entry of unauthorized *"researchers."* Sometimes swaying to the beat of a mix of pop, disco, hip-hop, and techno music piped out to the street, they generally act as a cross between silent barkers and goodwill ambassadors. Those browsers who do not enter the building frequently speculate in passing about the activities within; people commonly wonder out loud whether ESPN is *"filmed"* here. Consumers who do enter pass though a simple, spare vestibule and find themselves in the atrium.

THE ATRIUM

Stepping from the vestibule to the atrium, a visitor's first visual impression is of circularity, spaciousness, ascension, and light. This impression is often accompanied by exclamations of delight and occasionally of awe. For example, Sally, a twenty-year-old white female ESPN Zone customer, observes,

> The Hall idea is great . . . like gigantic. That floor makes you feel like you're on top of the world. You walk in here and it's kind of like you're the king of the world. You know, standing there in the middle or on a podium or something, and you're about to get an award medal.

The consumer's gaze is drawn quickly across the floor—where the ESPN Zone logo, emblazoned on a globe and tagged with the declaration "The Worldwide Leader in Sports" is usually noticed later, while

walking around—to the restaurant reception post and then quickly again up the stadium girder supports framing a television bank, past a tier of corporate sponsorship logos, beyond a second and third tier of video monitors embedded in an arching band of brushed metal, up and through the lattice railwork that simulates stadium screening and partially reveals the venues of the second floor, to the vaulted ceiling on whose dome, illuminated by klieg lights, is painted a semblance of a stadium, complete with lights, seated fans, and an open expanse of sky. In the moment it takes the gaze to sweep this quick arc and register the gestalt (which is unpacked more slowly later, while walking through and examining closer), the consumer experiences the secular infused with the sacred. Shifting in imagination from the domed vault of a mosque, basilica, or temple to the hole left open in a (Texas) stadium (perhaps to allow God to watch a favored team) and back again, consumers feel themselves placed in a so-called cathedral of consumption (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989; Ritzer 1999).

From the vantage point of the atrium, the consumer experiences an initial sense of the "domestic curvilinearity" characteristic of what is termed "hestial" dwelling (named for Hestia, the Greek goddess of the hearth and home) (see Figure 2). This characteristic is present architecturally: the building is centered, self-enclosed, and sensitive to vertical lines, in a way designed to encourage the "human spirit" to rise as the "divine essence" is drawn down. This architectural style conveys a contented sense of being-within-this-place at the same time the dome encourages a speculative imagining of being-out-there (Casey 1993, 133-38). The structure contrasts with the big-box architecture of conventional retail outlets and with hybrid formats of such flagship brand stores as Nike Town Chicago (Sherry 1998). The embodied behavior demanded by a hestial space—habitual, inscribed in memory, centered, measured, unpremeditated, intimate—is exhibited by consumers at ESPN Zone.

The soundscape of the building is amplified in the atrium. Greeters welcome, direct, and bid farewell to visitors in this space. Music is perhaps most undistorted here. Yells, cheers, and the background drone of conversation are gradually discriminated. Audio from the omnipresent video monitors streams into the atrium. Olfactory stimulation in the form of cooking smells and the aroma of beer is first discernible in the atrium as well. The immersion in, and threat of being overwhelmed by, sensory information, portended visually in the collage window displays

FIGURE 2: The Atrium

outside, begins in earnest in the atrium. An ESPN Zone employee observes,

> See the idea is when you walk in the door, they [Disney] try to overwhelm you. It's like eye-candy . . . you know the excitement, the enthusiasm. . . . [He then shouts and mimics a potential customer] Whoa!!! . . . and by the time you relax, I'm here to tell you exactly where you gotta go to continue to have fun. (African American male, thirties)

Like opening weekend box office, Disney knows that first impressions are all-important consumer experiences. It is the experience of being wrapped in an embrace made of images (in particular, images related to the comforting hold of television) and of participating in a dramaturgical event that the atrium ethos sets spinning into motion. Matt, a nineteen-year-old white male informant, expands on this notion:

> Um, I guess it's the whole atmosphere, you know, like all the TVs with all the games . . . the sports teams going on, then going upstairs and seeing all the different video games and it's just different to walk into something like that you know. . . . It's just kind of like you're kind of drawn to

> it. (You know) it's like "Oh!, look at this," "Oh! Look at that." It's real stimulating, I guess.

We are guilty of privileging the visual in this particular account, yet not to the exclusion of other senses because consumers are so strongly invited by the built environment to indulge their visually oriented, or scopic, desire. In terms of wayfinding and wayfaring, consumers exercise several options from the staging area of the atrium. Often, consumers move immediately to their right and into the gift store directly, ultimately exiting the building without visiting other internal venues. Some consumers move forward directly into the restaurant, while others veer left to the first-floor bar. Most visitors move to the ascending staircase to begin their trek through the sporting domains that comprise the core of the ESPN Zone servicescape. Let's wander with them through these domains.

The Studio Grill: Themed Restaurant

ESPN Zone's much-advertised slogan is, "Eat. Drink. Watch. Play." The order of these words may be no accident, for the profit margins on food are very high. The gastronomic participation of consumers is consequently very important to the financial viability of a large retail dining and entertainment complex, such as this one. ESPN Zone's primary restaurant is located on the first floor of the building and is named "The Studio Grill." The name expresses the television studio format that serves as the eatery's organizing theme, for the restaurant is designed to evoke the essence of the broadcast studios that form the pulsing heart of the ESPN network. Mock sets for the popular ESPN shows *Sports Center*, *Baseball Tonight*, and *NBA2Night* are prominently featured at different places throughout the restaurant space. Reality and unreality are combined and staged in subtle ways.

The entrance to The Studio Grill restaurant links to the Atrium (Figure 3). When guests have passed beneath the columns that support the control center above (sometimes pausing to use the computer terminals embedded in the girders to consult ESPN's Web sites), they reach the main boundary between the atrium and the restaurant. This boundary is signaled by the host desk, a metal facade, approximately midbody height, which is decorated with an ESPN Zone logo. The desk is situated in front of an impressive wall of thirty live video monitors whose

FIGURE 3: The Studio Grill Restaurant Host Desk

moving pictures seem to draw the gaze of guests toward them and perhaps influence their trajectories. The pictures on the screens are not single large images but reflections of multiple, inviting channels—an ever-varying montage of real-time sports programming. Standing behind this desk, in front of the wall of warmly flickering screens, are the hosts and hostesses who take the names of guests and seat them. They are garbed in white dress shirts and ties.

As guests enter the restaurant, they pass large glass display cases of original artwork commissioned by Chicago-area artists (Figure 4).[3] One case contains a collage of Chicago Bulls basketball-related memorabilia. Another glass display case, to the left of the host desk, houses Blackhawks sacra. The variety of these prominently displayed artistic collages draws the attention of guests. As Marsha, a midwestern white female in her twenties, who was visiting ESPN Zone for her first time, put it,

> It's eye-catching. There's a lot to look at. If you like sports and you can relate to the themes, it's fun to look at. There's so much in each display. It's not just, you know, here's a glass wall and here's a basketball. It's a whole theme of things put together. [For example,] the one down there

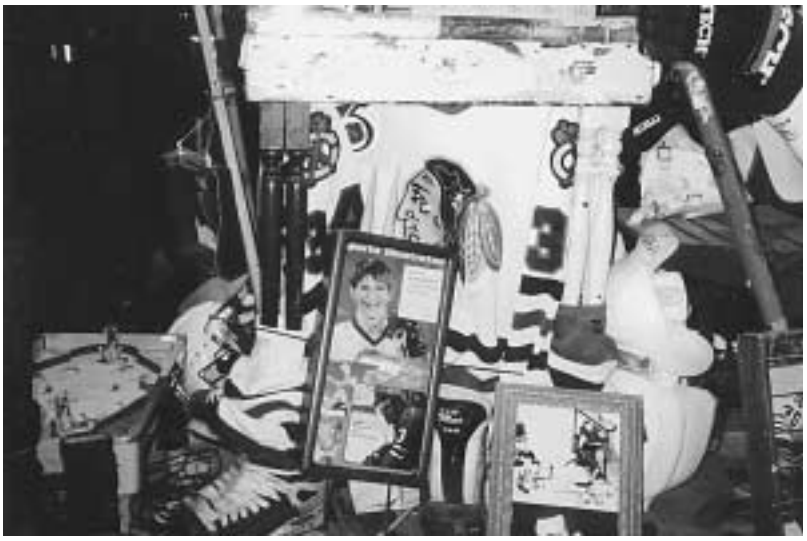

FIGURE 4: Display Case in The Studio Grill Restaurant

> [in The Studio Grill] with the Bulls. And then the Black Hawks one over there. I mean it's not just Michael Jordan in there, but they've got other themes.

Marsha's interpretation indicates that she appreciates the complexity of the artistic collages, relates to them, and finds them visually and mentally stimulating. She appreciates the thought and planning that have gone into arranging the art pieces and, in another part of her interview, relates this same insight to her consumption of the entire complex. The elaborate theming that Marsha noticed in the artworks is also present in The Studio Grill's guiding allusion of restaurant as television studio. The restaurant boasts a platform in the west corner of the dining room's large expanse. There are dining tables placed on it, yet it is also set up as a mock stage. An arched reporter's desk of the sort employed in news or sports shows is prominent. Spotlights illuminate the desk. A sign on a wall behind it reads *Sports Center.* This area is elevated both physically and psychically by its closeness to the essential center of ESPN. It is a place of honor within the restaurant, a spot to watch and from which to be watched—a stage fit for performance and fantasy. Tonya, a white female in her early twenties, explains:

Tonya: I like the fact that the downstairs restaurant is set up like a studio. I mean, who doesn't want to sit in Kirk Herbstriet's [ESPN college football sportscaster] chair? I can pretend that I am Stuart Scott or, like, the Anna Kournikova of sportscasting.

Interviewer: So when you sit there, you become the center of attention, or at least other people notice you are there?

Tonya: I guess I don't really care about the other people. It's just like people that go to places to feel more connected. Like *Star Wars* fans, or something.

As she clarifies, Tonya's Studio Grill fantasies seem less connected to the social world of people around her, and her elevation above them, than to her imputed closeness to ESPN and the transcendent world of glorious and talented sports figures. Sally, cited in the Atrium section above, similarly noted that the atrium's grand scale related to her fantasy that she was on top of the world, standing on a podium about to receive a medal like an athlete at the Olympics. As movie fans pilgrimage to sites related to their own personal Meccas, so does this place resonate with the essence of a spectacle into which Tonya and Sally invest themselves. Around these superiority and achievement fantasies, they may have constructed identity-affirming life themes and life goals (Mick and Buhl 1992). The grandness of this domain, its larger-than-life hyperreality (Baudrillard 1994), and its relationship to an elite class of being(s) provide, in these accounts, a sense of personal fulfillment, an individualistically satisfying closing of the frustrating gap between media figure and media consumer described frequently within the media studies literature (e.g., Fiske 1987).

Despite the many spotlights, the large space of the grill is dimly lit, which draws attention to the many glowing video monitors that provide their own unique type of light. Along the ceiling run large iron gridworks that contain cables and spotlights. On each spotlight is the distinctive ESPN logo. Beneath them, in metal mounts, are video monitors. These monitors, more than thirty in all, are dispersed throughout the area and display ESPN programming. The screens are purely for visual effect; two different shows are on at a time, and the sound is turned off. There are two other unifying sounds to replace it. Pop music plays in the background, at a fairly loud volume, and sounds from the computer games played upstairs in the sports arena are also audible. Mixed with conversation, when the restaurant is full, the noise provides

an aural collage, a complex din of different noises that guests must sometimes shout above to be heard. Warren, a white male informant in his late twenties, tells us about his experience of the television studio theme:

> You know, it creates sort of a white noise or static. It's not necessarily distracting, but it's like you can glance up and catch a play. I think it's kind of . . . quick burst, short attention span. Doesn't really get in the way, but there are diversions if you want them, you know. . . . There's a lot going on here, if you look at how they designed this place, but it's not super-intrusive. You can kind of block it out.

Warren's reflections suggest that the design and theming of the restaurant space allow the individual to choose between different forms of behavior and interaction as well as between different modes of presence. Some people choose to sit alone, their gazes seduced by the monitors. Others, with groups at their table, either chatter excitedly over the background noise or capitulate and turn their meal out into a costly TV dinner. Still others shift back and forth between conversation and television watching, using the TVs as a pleasant diversion, adding a feeling of relaxation and informality to the experience. It is thus far from a conventional, peaceful dining experience where customers might be tempted to linger over their meals. The overall impression seems to be one of liveliness, energy, and excitement. Warren's friend Dennis, an African American male in his early thirties, elaborates on this theme:

> For me, I like the energy. I don't want to go to a stuffy, businessperson place, you know, where you can hear a pin drop. I wanted some energy today, and I thought it was going to be a fun environment and there's some energy here.

The large, open kitchen intensifies the impression of energy. Above the kitchen, in huge capital serifs of polished light metal on a darker burnished background—cold, high tech, modern, masculine—the theming continues with the ESPN Sportscaster Chris Berman's famous descriptor "EN FUEGO." Against a wall lies another collage, with admixtures of framed glossy autographed photos of Chicago Bears and White Sox players arranged on the walls. On another wall, individual pictures of sports stars are arranged with each picture in a small glass case that also contains objects associated with a particular star. There is

another collage consisting of a large number of hockey sticks glued together. The menu contains considerable variety, with more than seventy items. Even the paper place mats on the dining tables on which the specials are printed alongside breaking sports news of the day take the form of multifariously rich collections of separate images and descriptions, with the ESPN brand featured prominently.

Zone Stuff: The Gift Shop

If Gottdeiner (1997, 74-75) is correct that commercial spaces must distract consumers from their ultimately exploitative aim, then Zone Stuff, the gift shop of ESPN Zone, might embody this ethos most directly. Zone Stuff is the area of the dining and entertainment complex whose function is to enable the purchase of (often high-priced) branded souvenirs—physical products—that embody experiences. The gift shop attempts to conjure memories into memorabilia by playing off of the experiential aspects of the rest of the ESPN Zone. To enact this, Zone Stuff embodies the ESPN Zone's unifying themes of collage, video monitors, blurred interactivity, and fiercely devotional branding.

Flanking the entranceways to the gift store, defining the boundary space, are cases whose contents juxtapose the casual with the classical, cleverly combining the amateurism of television spectatorship with professional participation, high culture with low (Figure 5). The products of the store are displayed in the same type of museum case as the many artworks presented throughout the retail environment. This may seek to suggest to consumers that these products should be viewed on an equal footing with precious sports paraphernalia such as Michael Jordan's rookie basketball card or Bobby Hull's actual hockey stick. The case is a collage that mixes together a pewter trophy; ESPN Zone–branded golf balls, key chains, and baseball caps; and a stack of television remote control units. The idiosyncrasy of the remote controls seems to elevate spectatorship to the rank of creation in a move that accentuates the 165 video monitors in the complex and echoes the imperative to "watch" of its motto. A metal flask and a martini glass with a rubber ducky add a more common, even childlike or mocking quality. Astroturf surfaces are used like dollops of paint to frame, adding texture and luring the golfers. As with the artworks in the Studio Grill area, this museum case contains food for eye and thought—yet another multidimensional collage calling out for the pleasurable

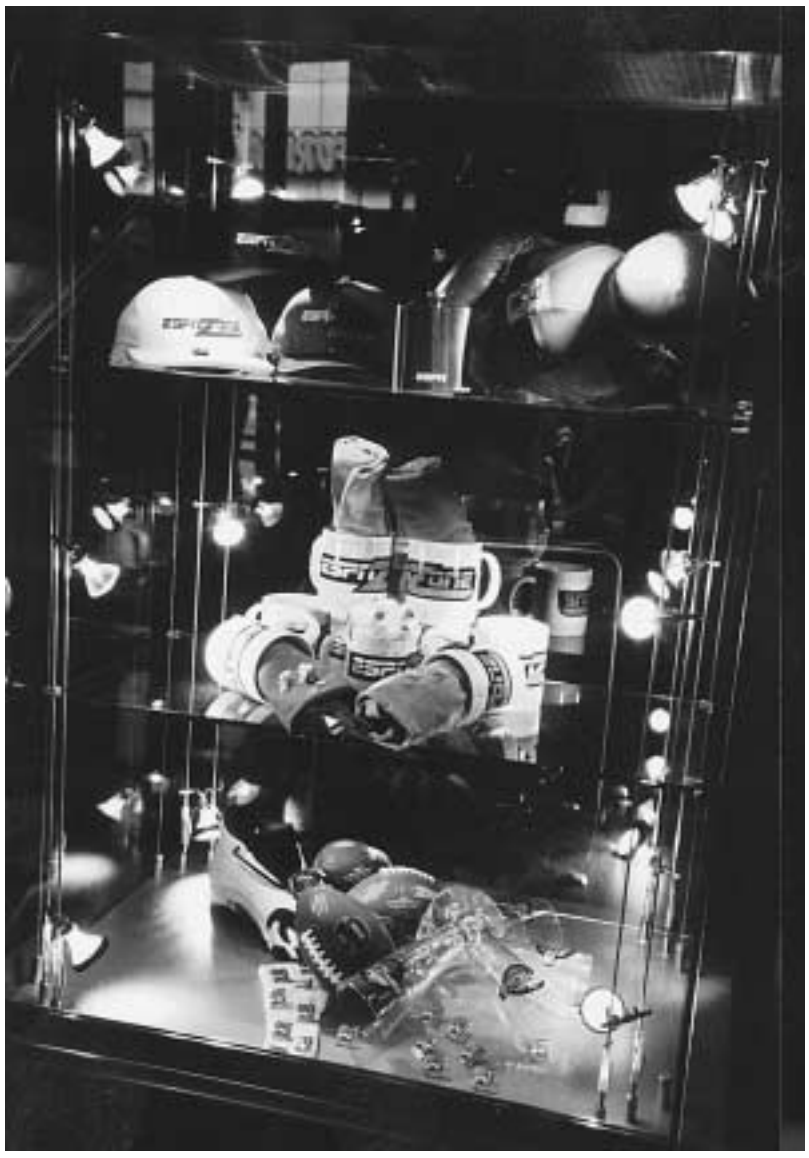

FIGURE 5: ESPN Zone Gift Shop Display Case

decoding of the sports-minded semiotician (for more on the pleasures of semiotic decoding, see McQuarrie and Mick 1992).

The gift store contains several other such cases that display and elevate ESPN Zone–branded products through inclusion, allusion, and

metonymy. A pewter trophy is filled with ESPN Zone–branded golf balls. A single black-and-white polo shirt stands in the case with an ESPN Zone Chicago logo as its proud crest. On an Astroturf surface, a beer glass spills one dozen ESPN Zone–branded golf balls onto the surface of a towel. Beer steins with sports balls built into their handles look on, as boxing gloves settle as if fresh from a prize fight. This display juxtaposes different sports with one another, sports with alcohol, exertion with leisure. Reflecting this juxtapositioning, everything in the store is branded or double branded. Polo shirts, T-shirts, and sweatshirts all carry ESPN Zone or ESPN Zone Chicago logos. Titleist golf balls are double branded with ESPN Zone. Hockey pucks contain ESPN Chicago and particular hockey-related aphorisms.

Participate and play, but pay is another, deeper message that the themed areas of the ESPN Zone hold in common. In Zone Stuff, this ethos is epitomized by the central attraction of the gift store: the display of sports balls. These balls are smaller than regulation sizes and are branded with the ESPN logo. The balls are positioned in big bin garbage cans at the rear of the store. The balls are priced at twelve dollars for a mini basketball or mini soccer ball or five dollars for a mini baseball. Something about the openness of the display bins seems to invite consumers to pick the balls up and play with them in the store. In fact, our field notes capture a clerk bouncing a basketball himself while fielding questions from a customer. A young customer who walked by at that moment wasted no time in picking up a ball himself. Embodying the palpability and interactivity of the servicescape, it is no wonder that these balls are the store's top sellers.

Finally, Zone Stuff contains its own banks of video monitors. Positioned on the walls over the counter are video monitors nestled in thick, burnished aluminum frames. The thick, art deco frames suggest that television screens, and their popular culture contents, may be (like the golf balls, beer steins, remote controls, and polo shirts) a form of high art. Accessible and proudly displayed, the video screens overshadow the few books that the store carries—such as the ESPN trivia book. These books are carefully positioned behind the counter on cherry-red mahogany shelves. The mahogany shelves also provide a library-like feel, but the inaccessible positioning of the books tends to give them a forbidden, or look-but-don't-touch feel that hints of a working-class anti-intellectualism of the sort sometimes espoused by ESPN sportscasters.

Simulation and Gaming: The Sports Arena

A vast ten-thousand-square-foot expanse of ESPN Zone's upper level is devoted to physical and virtual styles of games. At the entrance to the second floor, a greeter welcomes consumers. All smiles, the greeter is uniformed in a loose-fitting blue shirt reminiscent of a practice jersey often worn by high school basketball coaches, with the addition of the ever-present ESPN Zone crest. The uniforms contribute to the overall definition of the situation (Grove and Fisk 1983; Solomon 1998). "Hi. Welcome to ESPN Zone," the greeter says, with a smile, repetitiously, for what greeters have recounted to us is a *"mind-numbing"* ninety-minute shift. Moving straight ahead or to the left takes the informant into the arena's noisy whirlwind of games. These can be played individually or in competitive tandem with other players. Although it resembles nothing so much as a gigantic video arcade, ESPN Zone management deflects these associations by insisting the area be called the Sports Arena.

The Sports Arena showcases the overall blending of passive and active consumption that characterizes ESPN Zone, sports-related consumption and perhaps the wonder-filled world of contemporary mass media consumption in general (see, e.g., Fiske 1987; Wolf 1999). The arena provides an array of games. First are virtual games like golf, fishing, car racing, boat racing, motorcycle racing, ski boarding, 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 video games often have realistic input components, such as a fishing rod for the fishing game (rather than buttons or a joystick) or a motorcycle body or a horse to sit on for the racing game. For those not playing, there is a lot to watch, for each video game offers a video to monitor the fast-moving feast of images that invite spectatorship. As it was for Chauncey Gardner, protagonist of Jerzy Kosinski's scathing media society farce *Being There*, some just "like to watch." Eric, a male high school student, while viewing his friends shooting hoops in the basketball court, observed, *"It's more interesting to watch. I'm not too good [at playing the game]. Watching them in the monitor, watching the shows, music, and noises makes you*

get more into it." Another informant (white male, late twenties) amplifies this scopic appeal: *"I'm into sports, but not into video games. . . . This is interactive and everything, but it's not real. In here I like to watch. I don't play any of the games."*

The Sports Arena is a hodgepodge of players and impromptu gatherings of audiences. For instance, the more "real" and "hybrid" areas invariably attract spectators who linger to watch people struggle to climb the simulated rock wall, skydive into simulated terrain, or shoot baskets (Figure 6). The atmospherics of the arena are, in toto, a collage whose richness draws in viewers. Within each game, oversized monitors, rapid scene changes, and detailed renderings provide the complexity of images associated with collage. Furthermore, most of the video games are branded. They have been customized for ESPN Zone and contain multiple appearances of the ESPN brand tattooed on the physical casing and inscribed within the programming of the game. This logo is also projected on the floor throughout the arena to act as a visual threshold between contiguous zones.

In the Sports Arena, there is a direct relationship between payment and experience. Yet, as in casinos, the experiential expenditures are symbolically decoupled from the spending of everyday money. Customers instead must translate their dollars into points by purchasing a debit card. They pay for a debit card that contains points. Points are charged out at rates that can vary up to 100 percent—from thirty-three cents per point (for a five-dollar card) to seventeen cents per point (for a one-hundred-dollar card). Each game requires a different amount of points, but the average game costs somewhere in the neighborhood of eight points (about two dollars at the ten-dollar card rate). The noise, distraction, and obfuscation of the environs all conspire to cloud consumers' clear perception of the remarkably high pricing of these admittedly state-of-the-art video games. Some informants do, however, infer an attempt by managers to downplay the fact that money is being spent by the substituting of cards for currency.

The omnipresence of video games represents an important design innovation out of the fare of standard theme restaurants such as Planet Hollywood and into something much more interactive and experiential, such as Dave and Buster's (a male-oriented game arcade, restaurant, and bar chain). The Sports Arena is populated by youth; it is the youthful center of the ESPN Zone to which the younger than twenty-one crowd almost instantly gravitates. Caught in this orbit, and fuelling it

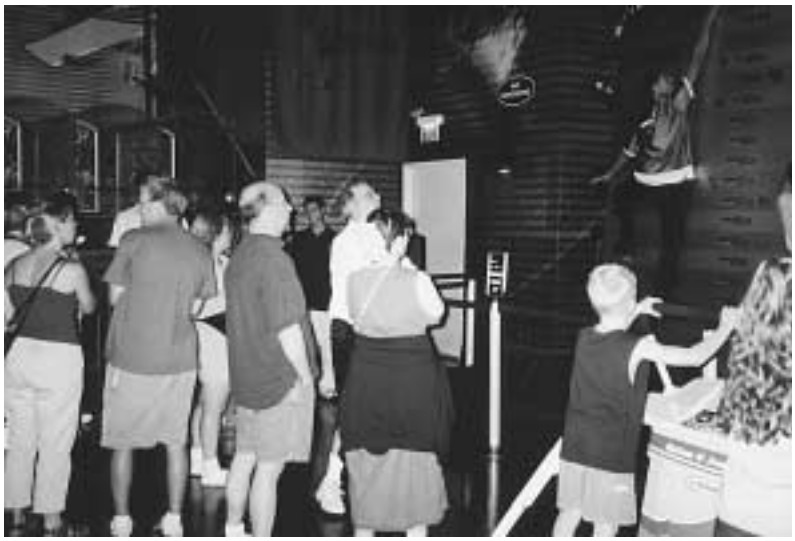

FIGURE 6: ESPN Zone Sports Arena

with infusions of cash to card, are the parents, who can be seen throughout the area watching their children play, cheerleading, and reaching frequently into the purses and wallets. Gottdeiner (1997) has noted the inversion of the putative leader-follower relationship between parents and children that occurs at theme and amusement parks. In ESPN Zone's Sports Arena, the same sort of relational reversal is evident.

The energizing experience of game playing has several other effects worthy of consideration. While satisfying the game-playing needs of children and drawing on sports-related meanings, it evokes the richly relevant inner child of sports buffs. A white American male (businessman, age forty-five) noted that *"these games remind me of when I was young."* Another white male in his twenties from Indiana who had returned to ESPN Zone Chicago for his third visit recalled favorable associations of childhood experiences combined with a delighted sense of rare privilege when he noted that *"It's almost like Chuck E. Cheese, when you're little, you can play older people games, you know?"* Some consumers engage in a certain amount of retrospection at ESPN Zone. Informants reflect on childhood episodes, which at once flow into the current experiential domain, evoking playfulness, competitiveness, and an overall sense of passion and fervor. Bob, a white businessman in his late thirties, comments,

> I like the basketball here. Not the big one [referring to the half court and standard-height hoop], the little one. I'm too old for the big one. Although, when I'm here, this place allows me to relax. Men can start acting like boys. It's kind of like an adult arcade. You see the kids and it's nice to have the opportunity to act like kids. This place takes you back to when you were a kid. You just get to have fun.

For some, individualistic modes of play are satisfying activities. Kamal, a businessman in his early forties, noted that *"It's more relaxing [to play against the computer]. You don't need to worry about your performance. It's against the computer."* However, game playing also affects competition, as people frequently gravitate to the games that pit them against one another. From one-on-one basketball to banks of motorcycle, car, or horse racers, computer-mediated competition is a popular commodity staged and offered for sale at ESPN Zone. Our observations and interviews reveal that this competition is an attractive feature of the Sports Arena that is often used by friends and coworkers to add nuance to their relationships, similar to the way in which other types of sports-related competition are sometimes employed.

For example, four young men from Chicago informed us that once a month they come from work to ESPN Zone to play racing games against one another. Said one, *"It's just not fun to play Nintendo alone at home."* During play, they shout and tease each other. This reversion to a simpler state may even temporarily wreak havoc with organizational hierarchies. Frederick, a male corporate banker who was at ESPN Zone for a business party, exclaimed that being in the ESPN Zone brought out a new aspect of his employer: *"Look at that guy. The boss is acting like a ten-year-old. He's acting differently."* Arena competition also breaks down some of the boundaries between staff and customers. As recounted to us by employee informants, an ESPN Zone policy is in place encouraging any Sports Arena employee to rise to the challenge of a guest. One employee will substitute for another so that work continues and competition can ensue. This challenge is a fairly common occurrence.

The Screening Room

The central forum for spectatorship, the Screening Room branches off from the Sports Arena as the other major area of the upper level, a venue purveying a much more exclusive and adult ambience. Besides

the washrooms (whose collective spaces boast more than a dozen video monitors), the Screening Room contains the only imposing door in the ESPN Zone (although, unlike the washrooms, this one is made of glass). This is a boundary marked by symbolic fence posts and patrolled by gatekeepers, signaling that permission is required from the white-uniformed hosts and hostesses before informants can proceed. For important games, on weekends and popular nights, a long line forms as informants wait to get into this secured space. To enter the most precious vantage point (the *"Ultimate Viewing Area"*), informants find they must contract to eat or drink. Even when the restaurant is nearly empty, their names are inscribed. After 5:00 p.m., the trial becomes more severe, as young-looking faces are carded for identification and excluded from entry.

On passing through the double glass doors, informants are admitted into another collage, another recurrent theme. This recursive quality is embodied in the Screening Room's design as a mosaic of six smaller and fairly distinct areas. These include the radio booth, the bar, two sky boxes, the Bristol Suite (the nonsmoking eating room), and the Ultimate Viewing Area. A gigantic televisual collage visually anchors the rooms. This collage is centered on an enormous sixteen-by-twelve-foot screen that is itself surrounded by a dozen thirty-seven-inch monitors, all broadcasting live sports events. Above the bank of televisions is a digitized message board that scrolls ESPN advertising, sports trivia questions, sports scores, and other sports newsy information.

Design flourishes also unify these disparate zones-within-a-zone-of-The-Zone. The outside and inside facade are framed in contrasting finishes. Glass walls give the room an open feel, invite looks, and encourage wondering eyes, while dark woods, furniture, and surfaces purvey a sense of enclosure and coziness. The presence of movie-style lighting and sound equipment combined with the ubiquitous monitors adds to the appeal of the Screening Room. The use of polished and matte metals adds a high-tech flavor to the mix. Within the ESPN Zone, the collage theme is omnipresent and fascinating, as expressed by Malia, a twenty-year-old African American female informant: *"Being here is like an adventure, you can walk around and always see something new."*

Different tiered levels add architectural interest and provide informants with opportunities to self-segment into consumption categories as nonsmoking diners, socializing drinkers, VIPs, or hardcore fans. The

sociospatial layering of this servicescape runs from the highest altitude of seating at the southern end of the room (the Bristol Room) to the lowest (almost invisible) seats on its northern end, at the Ultimate Viewing Area directly in front of the centerpiece wall of screens.

To the immediate left of the entrance, informants find the radio booth, designated for live broadcasts and interviews with celebrities, which are scheduled each week. Peppered with small art pieces highlighting Chicago sports teams, surrounded by glass, this room resembles a combination between an exhibitionistically "fishbowl" stage and an actual studio. When not in use (which is most of the time), this room might seem almost out of place. Yet, even in its dormant state, it impresses many, who gaze into its small-yet-sublime space, recalling its ghosts, foreshadowing its functionality, reading it as a valid testament to ESPNness.

As informants sweep past the radio booth, they are struck by a large bar area that, combined with the adults-only exclusivity of the space, seems small enough to retain a sense of community. With its rectangular countertop and wooden chairs, informants find it reminiscent of the 1980s hit television show *Cheers*. Yet, in the heart of the big city, some find this a darker bar, one bereft of *Cheers*' neighborhood charm. Drawing from the exclusive VIP lexicon of modern-day, often corporately financed sports stadia are two enclosed booths, termed *"skyboxes."* Like their stadium equivalents, these booths are not the best seats in the house, but they are the most exclusive (and, available for rental at an hourly rate, the most expensive). Glass-walled like square fishbowls, they offer a conspicuous form of media consumption, an ego-boosting way to watch and be seen. The booths contain luxurious leather couches and chairs and mahogany tables. They are fitted with high-tech air filters that zap even the most acrid cigar smoke and are equipped with the latest in audio and visual technology. Each booth has its own video monitor screens and sound controls, allowing informants to channel surf and otherwise participate in the experience of spectatorship. The rooms are named for two Chicago baseball superstars of the past and present and are decorated with prominent artistic depictions of them. The Ernie Banks (Chicago Cubs, "Mr. Cub" of the 1950s) box is at the eastern end of the Screening Room and is the larger of the two, while the Sammy Sosa box is more private, offering privacy blinds if desired. Each room is decorated with an artwork portraying its namesake sports hero.

At the point farthest from the wall of screens is the Bristol Suite, the nonsmoking eating area within the Screening Room. This is a separate room decorated by the ever-present banks of video monitors and a massive mural painting on the wall that chronologically depicts Chicago sports celebrities crossing decades and all types of sports. The visual sweep is epochal, drawing the gaze across baseball players from the turn of the century and ending with the Chicago Bulls team and management of the late 1990s, providing eaters with a historical sense of pride rooted in urban patriotism.

Finally, at the front line of the Screening Room is the Ultimate Viewing Area, with its leather recliners containing speakers in the headrests and channel selection controls in the armrests (see Kozinets et al. 2001). To the right of each recliner is a built-in serving area, large enough to hold a full-size platter and beer. On the left arm of the recliner is a control panel allowing one to direct specific audio to match the video seen from any of the thirteen screens. As informants chow, slurp, talk, and gawk, the ESPN Zone slogan scrolls across the top of the awe-inspiring monitor montage. The stock marketesque ticker tape talk screens slyly along, rakishly rhetorical, informing consumers while it seems to be asking them, "Eat. Drink. Watch. Play. What more do you need?" This viewing area is the staging ground for a variety of consumption experiences whose implications of transcendent spectacle, maternal attachment, masculinity, comforts-of-home status displays of cultural capital, interactivity, and control are significant (Kozinets et al. 2001).[4]

The Sporting Context: The Play's the Thing

We return to our informant, Warren (a white male in his late twenties), to initiate a discussion of the role of sport at ESPN Zone:

> I think that, you know, it's [the sports theme] also a great thing to have in case the conversation dies, you can talk sports, you know what I mean. . . . It's like a classic. . . . It's like a lot of guys and their dads never talk, but they talk sports [laughing]. It's something you can go back to if you need to.

Because we treat sport extensively in two companion papers (Kozinets et al. 2001; Sherry et al. 2001), we offer here a simple summary as a

contextual grounding for activity at ESPN Zone. As our informant indicates, sports have become a safe haven for male cultural interaction. Sport is a biologically basic, specialized form of play of a voluntary, self-fulfilling, fantastic, and generally nonutilitarian nature (Callois 1961; Huizinga 1950). Sport in the United States is commonly understood to be a ceremonial celebration of the perfect moment (Leonard 1993), enabling participants and spectators to achieve a state of flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1990) and sometimes of transcendence (Higgs 1995; Martin and Miller 1999). The prototypical play from which sport evolves is the pair bond mirroring behavior of mother and infant (Callois 1961; Sutton-Smith 1980), and its formal institutional roots are liturgical (Blanchard and Cheska 1985; Turner 1974). Quite appropriately, drama has similar origins. Etymologically, sport invokes an aboriginal sense of the paramount nature of leisure and the sacred cast of play (Guttman 1992; Huizinga 1950; Novak 1976). The sites of sporting spectacle have traditionally had attributions relating to paradise (Higgs 1995). Sport is often likened to a secular ritual and a civil religion in the United States (Duthie 1980; Lipsyte 1975; Novak 1976).

Let's examine sport in terms of Geertz's ([1972] 1973) tripartite model of social context, metaphoric content, and dramatic shape. Sport is a vehicle of cultural, patriarchal, and corporate ideology (Bourdieu 1991; Eitzen and Sage 1986; Hart 1976; Kinder 1991; Leonard 1993). It promotes philosophies of social Darwinism and moral Manicheanism (Baker and Boyd 1997; Dunning and Rojek 1992), celebrates physical prowess and an erotic aesthetic (Gorn and Goldstein 1993; Guttman 1996), and emphasizes the issues of locality and nostalgia in the process of identity politics (Boyd 1997a, 1997b). Contemporary mass-mediated sport has a melodramatic form that allows for the simultaneous questioning and reaffirming of the status quo (Kinder 1991; Rose and Friedman 1997). Sport engenders a state of communal togetherness among its devotees (Turner 1974), and the broadcast format has been described as the masculine counterpart to the soap opera's maternal gaze (Rose and Friedman 1997), allowing males not only to bond with but also merge with commentators who model the role of ideal spectator. Perhaps most intriguing is the ambivalence encoded within sport as a vehicle of multiple contradictions; consumers compartmentalize the many inconsistencies, subaltern themes, and challenges to ideology that sport encompasses (Martin and Miller 1999; Morgan and Meier 1995).

On the physical and virtual playgrounds of the ESPN Zone, consumers disport themselves in a variety of manners and are differentially aware of the superstructure that pervades their activity. Each, however, knows that he or she has come to play, or in those reluctant instances, to play along. The site is a celebration of diversion, distraction, and distortion, a third place of sorts (Oldenburg 1989) where even the currency assumes a digital form, dissociating the actual commercial transaction of the encounter from its experiential payoff. In this fantastic geography, belief is temporarily suspended, and regression in the service of ego is the norm. If sport becomes sport[2] when description overshadows play, allowing commentary to overdetermine activity, and sport[3] emerges when commentary becomes part of media infrastructure (Eco 1987; Miller 1999), then ESPN Zone might properly be construed as sport $^{n\text{-}1}$, where *n* is an imagined future in which consumers will interact holographically with network personnel in the cocreation of an athletic event.

INTERPRETIVE SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Eat, drink, watch, play, *and* buy: to modify the motto of the enterprise is a most appropriate interpretation of the message encoded within the structure of the ESPN Zone. Gottdeiner (1997) theorizes that all "businesses must disguise the instrumental exchange relation of money for a commodity as another relation between commercial place and the consumer. . . . Commercial spaces try to entertain while they promote consumption" (pp. 74-75). In themed environments, this instrumental relationship is both more overt and yet often assumes more subtle forms (see Pine and Gilmore 1999). For the lived experience of retail theater is generally not pay to play but pay to stay. The underlying desire to remain emplaced in the retail environment presupposes a sustainable emotional link on which the themed space must make good and from which it must seek incremental return on investment.

Retail theater is staged to create desires to enter, stay, and return. This *coup de théâtre* transpires through a complex combination of architecture and human performance. From the introductory atrium to the themed Studio Grill restaurant, from the Zone Stuff gift store to the hyperactive Sport Arena video game arcade and the vicarion's dream

Screening Room: throughout the realms of the ESPN Zone, we find repeated unifying themes of densely packed and purposefully ubiquitous symbolic collage, video monitors, and branding. This emphasis on extravaganza, simulation, and implosion draws consumers into a web of secular sport-oriented sacraments that loom in a larger-than-life liminal state (a liminal state is a state that is socioculturally marginal, or betwixt and between; see Turner 1974). The symbolic complexity of collage holds the attention of consumers, drawing them toward transcendent realms. The profusion, quality, and size of video monitors reinforce themes of potently escapist television-related consumption that overwhelm their ordinary connotations of everyday life. The intensely pervasive branding weds these aroused transcendent desires to a potent iconic brand: ESPN. The pronouncement of Disney's Chief Executive Michael Eisner is provocative in this regard:

> We think of a brand like a pointillist painting. . . . Everything you do for your brand is a point on the canvas. An advertising campaign is one point, say. Each customer's experience is a point. . . . At the end of a decade, you can have hundreds and thousands of new, wonderful, pretty points, and they can create a beautiful brand picture. But if you've been sloppy with some of your points, you can have an atrophied, old-fashioned, muddled picture, and no one is going to want to hang it on their wall. A brand takes a long time to build, and a long time to destroy, and both happen as a result of lots and lots of small actions. (quoted in Wetlaufer 2000, 120)

Eisner's metaphor of brand-as-pointillistic painting and his ultra hands-on management style synergizes intense attention to detail and the taking advantage of every single branding opportunity available. In addition to its collages, video monitors, and powerful branding, ESPN Zone serves up a blurred sense of interactivity, in which participation and observation become indistinguishable from one another. This occurs, for example, in the simultaneous playing and watching of video games, the active spectating of the involved fan, or the incessant program direction of the channel surfer.

In its structuring of a pay-to-stay experience, the ESPN Zone moves well beyond the "eatertainment" category (comprising restaurants such as the Rainforest Café, Planet Hollywood, NBA City Orlando, the Hard Rock Café, and others) and becomes a fully realized site of the NMC, which Ritzer (1999) claims are currently transforming our experience.

These NMC bundle a variety of experiential consumption opportunities together in a single venue and through the agency of spectacle—generated in the case we detail here primarily through extravaganza, simulation, and implosion—encourage the consumer to participate in forms of secular sacrament rituals in the hope of achieving transcendence (Ritzer 1999). This promise of reenchanting everyday life is all the more seductive for its being offered from within the context of what is widely recognized as the closest and oldest approximation to the civil religion we have in the United States: sport. Finally, the seductiveness is enhanced further by the emplacement of sport in an NMC servicescape, where the sacral connotations of shopping as secular ritual (Miller 1998; Zepp 1986) pervade the activity, rendering shoppertainment twice hallowed in the bargain.

Rather too uncritically (or paradoxically, reflexively critically), Ritzer (1999, 92) rushes to view the NMC as part of what Foucault (1995, 298) has termed the "carceral archipelago" of contemporary society. Stopping just short of labeling them collectively as a total institution, Ritzer construes the NMC largely in terms of social control, of the constraints they place on consumers. While this view may be more relevant to such Disney enterprises as *The Magic Kingdom* (Fjellman 1992) or *Celebration* (Ross 1999; Frantz and Collins 1999), it is certainly not nuanced enough to capture the ethos of our present hybrid venture. In the case of the ESPN Zone, surveillance and spectacle conspire to encourage disinhibition as much as inhibition, license as well as discipline. We must also add to the mix the almost blatant (yet perhaps ramifying from a subcultural subconscious) surrealism of the place whose effects are just as profound. In its flagrant juxtaposition of museum cases and remote controls, of commissioned artwork, magazine covers, and baseball cards, ESPN Zone constantly pairs the banal with the iconic, conflating the sacred and the mundane, launching the commonplace into the realm of the mythological, and tearing up the fence that separates high culture from low (see also Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Jameson 1983). The result can be as flush with a sense of empowerment as it is with one of inundation.

We are drawn to another Foucauldian metaphor, that of the panopticon (Foucault 1995). The panopticon was a creation of nineteenth-century thinker and tinkerer Jeremy Bentham. It was a design for a perfect prison in which a round, hollow building was constructed with only a tower at its center. The outside wall was composed of single prison

cells so that each cell could be sighted from the central tower. With a supervisor placed in the central tower and with the proper lighting, the supervisor could watch every cell, and the prisoner interred within would never know when she or he was being watched. Foucault (1995) compared the cells to a multitude of small theatres in which visibility was a trap. We see set in play by the ESPN Zone architecture a kind of obverse panopticism to the one envisioned by Foucault. The ring-like building of the periphery surrounds a focal "control center." The peripheral structure is studded with embedded video monitors, while the control center boasts a bank of fourteen video monitors. Images in the periphery are determined by the programmers seated in the center, who monitor these images on their central consoles. Not observation but rather image and information dissemination—the narrowcasting of spectacular performance (including the occasional soap opera) to a multiply engaged audience—is the function of the control center. Infotainment in all its engaging and distractive glory is the output. While an attempt to hold the consumer's attention captive is mounted, the habit of teleconditioning (Kottak 1990) resists this effort. The multiple attempts to discipline the visual field ultimately reinforce a type of leisurely wandering.

Ironically, this holding by encouraging to wander, this fragmenting to keep things moving, is a hyperreal simulation of the multitasking, channel-surfing environment of the consumer's home, absent the degrees of freedom available to the conventional viewer, whose agency is limited now by product availability yet amplified by projective fantasy. In a hall whose mirrors are television screens rather than surveillance monitors and whose reflected broadcasts the viewer is both able to influence and unable to alter, the panoptic gaze exercises intermittent control at best. Such a gaze may influence throughput to the experience without determining (or even imagining) the nature of the experience itself.

Although control center operators have considerable discretionary latitude, their programming choices are sometimes dictated by the *"philosophy"* of particular areas (such as the restaurant, which requires more disjointed, discontinuous programming to discourage lingering and increase turnover). Sometimes, the operators will honor customers' requests to display particular contests or events. The control center is a social cynosure of the building (a cynosure is an object that serves as a focal point of attention and admiration). Consumers must pass the

control center both entering and leaving the attractions of the second floor. The control center is a focus of consumers' observations; consumers monitor the monitors and the operators. Here, the scopic drive countermands the panoptic gaze. Consumers are fascinated by the apparent *"behind the scenes"* glimpse into *"mission control."* The console and its minders become a living diorama, an interactive exhibit where collage gives way to montage. Consumers find the experience evocative of *"Oz"* (not, *pace* Foucault, the M-City prison of HBO renown), except that they are encouraged to pay attention to the man behind the curtain. Consumers barrage the operators with questions about the physical plant, local touristic possibilities, the progress and outcome of individual contests (past and present), and sports trivia in general. The operators keep sports almanacs at their desk to supplement the vast personal knowledge they dispense. This quizzical interaction itself takes on the aspect of a contest for participants. Several operators maintain that the most frequently asked question they hear from consumers is "How do I get your job?"

One architectural design concept employed to synergize the creative process is called, appropriately enough for our purposes, "zones" and encourages building layout to follow a free-flowing principle of activity centers intergrading into one another, each given over to a particular function but inviting interaction across zonal inhabitants (Leonard and Swap 1999, 142). At our field site, zones are demarcated by activity, signage, background art work, soundscape differences, "porous" walls, lighting, and a host of other semiotic cues, and yet consumers are able (indeed encouraged) to watch each other within and across zones, as well as notice constantly that they themselves are being watched as they watch. Verbal interaction across the zones is common as well.

Hestial buildings like the ESPN Zone also have been described as "participational" and "topographical" (Casey 1993, 141). Dwellers in such buildings experience "centered emphatic-sensory interrelations," which link the body as "in-the-center-of-a-situation" to other bodies and objects in the same situation, resulting in a cocreation of the place (Casey 1993, 141). Because it colludes with the lived body, a hestial building creates its own "near sphere constructed in terms of zonal places and complaces" and defines its own locale in which "every topologically pertinent ingredient participates," the net result being a "truly porous built place" with numerous apertures into the surrounding world (Casey 1997, 141). Ironically, the apertures at ESPN Zone are virtual,

electronic or simulated, in keeping with current philosophy of shopping mall design (Csaba 1999).

CONCLUSIONS: ON SPORT, SURVEILLANCE, AND SPECTACLE

Our study of ESPN Zone points to the subtle interaction between marketer intention and consumer lived experience captured quite well by the Disney term *imagineering.* Peñaloza's (1999) visual ethnography of the enacted nature of consumption spectacle and Sherry's (1998) autoethnographic account of the dramaturgical nature of servicescape engagement—each conducted independently in the identical venue—emphasize the performative, cocreative, hybrid, and multisensory essence of the phenomenon widely known as retail theatre (see also Bitner 1990, 1992; Grove and Fisk 1983). Each of these authors highlights the reciprocal interactions between ecology, social structure, and ideology that underlie such theatrics. The NMC nature of ESPN Zone is much more fully realized than the Nike Town Chicago of ethnographic record, however. The surveillance/spectacle dialectic at work here, and the immersive, embodied nature of consumer experience at ESPN Zone, demands a more nuanced dramaturgy than Nike Town theorists have advanced to unpack retail theatre.

At Nike Town Chicago, design emphasizes that experience emerges from the product. At ESPN Zone, experience *is* the product and is a simulacrum of the ESPN programming experience. At ESPN Zone, sport is a medium (i.e., both an agency *and* an elemental habitat) in which consumers are suspended: the tractor beam of the narrowcast, the physicality of the play, the spectatorial gaze, the gustatory satiety, the hyperstimulation of the senses, and the ceaseless parade of visitors all conspire to put the consumer *"in the zone,"* to facilitate the *"zoning out"* of altered consciousness that utopia demands. Being in this zone demands an obverse accommodation to the one made by viewers of voyeuristic programming such as *The Real World*, *Survivor*, or *Big Brother.* The gaze—and more often, the glance—is more introjective than projective. But what is internalized beyond a superficial Foucauldian discipline of sport as a reinforcement of the status quo is the state of athleticism-as-manifest-on-television, a feeling of being-like-a-TV-athlete, a sense of self as tel-athlete. This sense of the

elevation of that which is mass mediated is a powerful phenomenon on whose experiential foundation ESPN Zone—and many other themed retail environments, such as Nike Town, the Hard Rock Café, Planet Hollywood, and the All Star Café—is constructed. Understanding the politics and marketability of fame and glory is an area ripe for other ethnographic investigations into consumer experience.

Foucault's (1995) discussion of the implications of the panopticon instructs our analysis of this phenomenon. In his postulation, the panopticon induces a state of consciousness and permanent visibility that effectively dampens autonomous thought and action. In addition to being a structure that allows for superior observation, Foucault avers that the panopticon also functions as a laboratory where experiments are conducted, behavior is altered, and individuals are trained and corrected. The constant threat of surveillance orchestrates and allows for this complex system of discipline and dominance to occur.

At ESPN Zone, the panopticon, embodied as the control center, serves as the literal and figurative brain, ceaselessly processing, presenting, calculating, and directing images and information to an eagerly consuming public. Because the consumer's view of the control center is unobstructed, consumers can see what is being produced as it is being produced. In this laboratory, it is identity that is one of the key subjects of experimentation, an identity often admixed to the superior standing of idealized others. What is more, consumers can determine what is seen, becoming, in effect, coproducers. This reversal subverts the panoptic behavioral dynamic described by Foucault (1995). Our observations suggest that a mutual acknowledgement of an ever-present gaze is at once liberatory and constricting. Consumers are aware that their actions are guided loosely but sense that individuality and experimentation are encouraged and even required for successful navigation of the NMC environment like ESPN Zone. This suggests an important theoretical extension. We postulate, therefore, that retail theatre demands a mixture of scripted role-playing and improvisation to feel authentic.

Peters (1997) observed insightfully that "it doesn't take much squinting to see in Foucault's panopticism an allegory of invasive media" and imagines mass media to be complicit in the "waning of place as a container of experience" (p. 77), forcing (or at least encouraging) consumers to become "nomads" in search of "lost semiotic homelands" (p. 79). ESPN Zone is just such a homeland, however "perforated" the "lifeworld" of personal experience may be by mass

mediation (p. 92). In a supermediated world (Real 1989), where the current marketing practice of premium pricing drives more "average" consumers away from attendance at sports events held in actual stadiums than ever before (Milne and McDonald 1999; Swift 2000), venues such as ESPN Zone Chicago become viable alternatives, even sites of active resistance to the actual physical attendance of sports contests. What is more, it offers more than spectatorship of fame; it offers momentary glimpses of identification with fame.

ESPN Zone becomes an alternate or oblique "friendly confines," with all the characteristics of "homeyness" (McCracken 1989) that a disaffected Chicago sports fan or a time-pressed tourist might desire. "Eat, Drink, Watch, Play: What More Could You Want?" is a compelling argument in either hyperindustrial or postmodern worlds. It points to another theoretical extension—that these hyperreal spaces are substitutes directed and targeted to the middle and lower-middle classes that cannot afford the real thing. Perhaps the multiple profusion of simulated exotic destinations in Disney World's EPCOT Center and on Las Vegas' unparalleled strip signals the same consumption epoch. As consumers become priced out of particular markets—for exotic travel, sports, and particular types of glamour or leisure—markets emerge in which corporations can sell, in a time-based, pay-to-stay format, temporary access to their simulation.

How does such a place resolve the contradictions between providing a friendly and trusted space and the revenue models of contemporary business that are between community and marketplace? ESPN Zone resolves it in a way that Nike Town never can, as the latter is an impoverished NMC, no matter its brilliant ingenuity, in comparison to the former. ESPN Zone owns the category—possibly even the cultural domain—of sport. More specifically, it owns the domain of broadcast sport, that is, the primal event served up as spectacle by commentators whose celebrity rivals that of the athletes whose exploits they glorify. These commentators are at once the epitome and apotheosis of the fan; they are projectible vehicles of the first order. While Nike athletes may embody sport as it is played and suffuse the Nike brand with authenticity, the ESPN Zone athletic complex embodies sport as it is experienced by the fan, a mélange of participant observation viscerally grounded and intellectually exalted. Whereas consumers pay to play to stay in *"the Zone,"* they are infrequent purchasers of merchandise at Nike Town. ESPN Zone maximizes opportunities for buyer behavior, a

hallmark of the NMC. Even as managerial theorists imagine stores like Nike Town levying a cover charge for the consumption of ambience in the future (Pine and Gilmore 1999), ESPN Zone imagineers have rendered this notion virtually unnecessary. If Nike Town (whose design elements have now gone the way of the Gap) was an exemplar of the emergent NMC, it must remain a niche player whose refinements will be incorporated into more fully articulated, thematically evolved NMCs such as ESPN Zone.

This study is intended to sharpen our understanding of the role of architecture in structuring and guiding this consumer experience. At ESPN Zone Chicago, a consumer can shop any of the "experience realms" (Pine and Gilmore 1999, 30) that motivation prompts. All of the senses may be engaged. The site encourages variety seeking, offering different experiences for different consumer segments as well as different experiences for individual consumers. The built environment of the site is the stage on which the consumer enacts fantasies and dreams—with enough verisimilitude and reduced risk—that real life often does not permit. Such an NMC affords the consumer a host of roles from which to choose, providing both a sense of agency and one of mastery as the fantasies are consumed. Or, rather, purchased. It is precisely this set of properties that we believe researchers into consumer experience must draw their attention to understand engagement, participation, and attributions of trust and authenticity.

In his sweeping critique of postmodern theorists (among them Foucault, Lacan, Derrida, Lyotard, Baudrillard, Debord, and, chiefly, Jameson), Denzin (1991) declared that "lived experience, in terms of its hyperreal representations, has become the final commodity in the circulation capital" (p. 44). He turned to cinema to read the "public contours" (p. 63) of the postmodern self, finding features such as the blurring of past and present, pastiche and parody, the placement of the viewing subject in an eternal present, the lure of nostalgia, the pervasiveness of the virtual, the proliferation of existential dilemma, the tactical use of wit and fantasy, the interplay of collage and voyeurism, the struggle against anhedonia, and the cinematic/videographic mode of knowing to be at work. He managed to conduct his analysis of cultural logics without reference to a civilizational focus and cinematic vehicle virtually without parallel: sport. Given his view that the postmodern era is a cinematic one and that the voyeur is the iconic postmodern self (p. 155), Denzin's overlooking of sport is uncharacteristically shortsighted.

Each of his postmodern contours is present in high relief at the ESPN Zone.

If we accept that television viewing is an embodied process (we "submuscularize" in the watching; see McLuhan 1994), reception is about felt meaning, television watches *us* (just as in the "returned gaze" of the cinema), and both the cinematic and televisual reciprocal gaze invite us to cocreate the spectacle their transmitted images represent (Baudrillard 1994; De Kerckhove 1995; Dixon 1995), then consumers at ESPN Zone are experiencing being-in-the-television concurrently with being-in-the-[particular]-sportsworld and being-in the-building. This simultaneous sensation contributes to the altered state of being-in-the-zone. It is up to future researchers of consumer experience to explore the profusion of similar zones emerging in our increasingly themed Western marketplaces.

NOTES

1. Pseudonyms are employed for all informants in our study. Emic (culturally intimate) terms are placed in quotation marks and italics when not attributed to a particular informant.

2. The cultural commingling of money, achievement, and sports is by now incontrovertible. Time is money; clocks are intrinsic to sports; pro sports are big money.

3. The semiotic codes of this museum-like display case for precious collectible themed objects is familiar from its use in the Hard Rock Café and Planet Hollywood, two other popular and trend-setting themed restaurants. The use of museum casing should not be read as unique to ESPN Zone.

4. The behaviors so evocative of enchantment and entrancement that informants display and discuss in this area are unpacked in a companion article to do interpretive justice to this phenomenon.

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