



Master's degree in Relationship Marketing

**Effects of Gameful Experience on Consumer
Brand Responses: The case of Vans World**

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Leiria, March 2026



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Dissertation under the supervision of Professor Alcina Teresa Gaspar Ferreira of the
School of Technology and Management of Polytechnic Institute of Leiria

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Leiria, March 2026

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Dedication

Life brings immense challenges and sacrifices, and every step forward is a victory. Dedicated to myself, as a reminder that persistence and hard work can turn challenges into achievements.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor for the guidance, support, and valuable feedback provided throughout the development of this thesis. Their expertise and encouragement were essential to the completion of this work.

I am also grateful to the faculty and staff of the School of Technology and Management of Leiria for the academic environment and resources made available during my studies.

Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends for their constant support, patience, and encouragement throughout this journey.

Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the role of gameful experience in shaping consumer brand responses, within the context of marketing and branded interactive experiences. As brands increasingly seek alternative ways to engage consumers, this study examines how experiential qualities associated with games can be applied to brand–consumer interactions.

Objectives: This dissertation aims to: (1) conceptualise gameful experience by integrating insights from game studies, psychology, and marketing literature; (2) analyse the key dimensions of gameful experience as proposed in the Gameful Experience (GAMEX) framework; and (3) examine how these dimensions manifest within a branded game context, using a game developed by the brand Vans as a case study.

Methodology: Methodologically, this study adopts an exploratory qualitative approach, combining a bibliographic review with a case study of a branded game developed by Vans.

Results: The results reveal that player motivation is strongly shaped by exploratory gameplay elements, particularly autonomy, discovery, and environmental storytelling. Explorer-type players exhibited higher levels of engagement when game mechanics supported open-ended interaction and self-directed progression. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that gameful experiences—especially enjoyment, absorption, creative thinking, and activation—are positively associated with consumer brand responses, including increased engagement, more favourable brand attitudes, and stronger emotional connections with the brand. Overall, the integration of exploration-driven design strategies emerges as a key factor in enhancing both player experience and sustained consumer–brand engagement.

Keywords: gameful experience, gamification, consumer engagement, branded games, brand experience, marketing

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List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

ESTG	School of Technology and Management
MOGQ	Motives for Online Gaming Questionnaire
IPL	Polytechnic Institute of Leiria
VMQ	Videogaming Motives Questionnaire

1. Introduction

In recent years, understanding and influencing consumer behaviour has become increasingly challenging due to market saturation, information overload, and the declining effectiveness of traditional marketing communication strategies. As consumers are exposed to an increasing number of brands and messages, capturing their attention and fostering meaningful engagement has become a central concern in contemporary marketing. In response, experience-driven and interactive approaches have gained prominence, particularly those drawing on elements traditionally associated with games and play.

Video games have long been recognised for their ability to promote relaxation, social connection, and entertainment (Jones, Scholes, Johnson, Katsikitis, & Carras, 2014). Beyond entertainment, research has highlighted their potential in several areas, including education (Janarthanan, 2012), cognitive functioning enhancement (Wang et al., 2016), and the development of skills such as hand–eye coordination (Gupta et al., 2021). These findings underscore the broader value of games as experiential systems capable of eliciting strong psychological, emotional, and behavioural responses, which has contributed to their increasing relevance beyond traditional gaming contexts.

Within marketing, the potential of games has been amplified by the emergence of immersive and interactive technologies that enable consumers to actively engage with brands. However, the experiential mechanisms underlying these interactions remain insufficiently explored. Prior research has shown that gamified brand–consumer interactions can significantly enhance brand engagement by fostering deeper involvement and more meaningful brand experiences (Berger et al., 2017). However, despite the growing body of research on gamification, limited attention has been given to the experiential mechanisms through which gameful systems shape consumer brand responses, particularly in branded game environments. Much of the existing literature on gamification and branded games has prioritised the identification and implementation of game elements, rather than systematically examining the psychological and experiential states elicited during interaction. Consequently, there remains limited theoretical

understanding of how gameful experiences function as mechanisms shaping consumers' cognitive, affective, and behavioural responses towards brands.

Although gamification is commonly defined as the application of game elements in non-game contexts, comparatively little attention has been paid to the experiential dimension underlying these interactions—namely, the psychological states induced by engagement with gameful systems. This represents a significant gap in the literature, given that experiential responses such as enjoyment, absorption, creative thinking, and activation are central to both player engagement and the development of meaningful consumer–brand relationships.

Addressing this gap, the present study conceptualises gameful experience as a multidimensional experiential construct and examines its role as a key mechanism through which branded game environments influence consumer brand responses.

Against this backdrop, the general objective of this study is to analyse the effects of gameful experience on consumer brand responses. More specifically, this dissertation aims to: (1) conceptualize gameful experience by integrating insights from game studies, psychology, and marketing literature; (2) examine the key dimensions of gameful experience as proposed in the gameful experience (Gamex) framework; and (3) explore how these dimensions manifest within a branded game context. Accordingly, this research seeks to address the following overarching research question: *How do gameful experiences influence consumer responses towards brands in branded game environments?*

Methodologically, this study adopts an exploratory approach with a qualitative orientation. The study begins with a bibliographic review aimed at establishing a solid theoretical foundation on gamefulness, gameful experience, and consumer engagement. This is followed by the development of a case study focusing on a branded game created by the brand Vans, which serves as a concrete context for examining how gameful experiential dimensions are expressed within a real-world marketing application.

This dissertation is structured into nine chapters. Following the introduction, Chapter 2 presents the theoretical background. Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology, and

Chapter 4 presents the case study. Chapter 5 discusses the findings, while Chapter 6 presents the conclusions, theoretical and managerial implications, and limitations and directions for future research. Finally, the bibliography and webography are presented.

2. Theoretical Background

This chapter presents the theoretical foundation of the dissertation by reviewing key concepts related to gamefulness, gameful experience, and their relevance to marketing and consumer behaviour research. Drawing on interdisciplinary literature from game studies, psychology, human–computer interaction, and marketing, the chapter aims to clarify how experiential qualities traditionally associated with games can be conceptualised and applied in branded contexts.

The chapter begins by examining the concept of gamefulness and its relationship with games and gamification, establishing a conceptual distinction between gameful systems, gameful design, and gameful experience. It then explores the notion of gameful experience as a psychological state, with particular attention to its multidimensional nature as proposed in the Gameful Experience (Gamex) framework. Subsequently, the main dimensions of gameful experience—enjoyment, absorption, creative thinking, activation, absence of negative affect, and dominance—are discussed in detail, integrating perspectives from both game design and consumer behaviour literature. Finally, the chapter addresses the relationship between gameful experience and consumer brand responses, providing the theoretical basis for the empirical analysis developed in the subsequent chapters.

2.1. Gamefulness

“Gameful” or “Gamefulness” was first introduced by McGonigal (2011) as a complement to “playfulness”. This distinction also appeared in Human Computer Interaction (HCI) research on playfulness, such as the Playful Experience Framework (PLEX), and games and game design studies tied back to Caillois’ concept (1958) of “paidia” and “ludus”. Where “paidia” (or playing) denotes free-form, expressive, and improvisational behaviour of play, “ludus” denotes rule-bound, goal-oriented play (or gaming).

“Gamefulness” has been approached in research as a phenomenon used to clarify and define “gamification” (e.g. Deterding et al., 2011; Huotari & Hamari, 2017) given the overlap of the concepts while still being, analytically, different extensions of the same

phenomena. While a prevalent concept in gamification research, “gamefulness” is typically only loosely defined and relies on researchers’ own intuitive understanding of games (Landers et al., 2018). Deterding et al. (2011: p.11) proposed a definition for this phenomenon as “the experiential and behavioural qualities” of gaming, while McGonigal (2015: p. 655) defined the concept of “gameful” as “experiences and systems [as those that] effectively integrate some of the key structural and aesthetic elements of games”. In contrast to both these proposals, Huotari & Hamari (2017) defined “gamefulness” based on the user’s perceptions as an “experiential condition unique to games”.

Two key inferences can be drawn from these definitions: 1) a person playing a game enters a space or state during gameplay; and 2) that space or state is common across experiences that could be defined as games (Landers et al., 2018). This is also seen in game design studies in the form of the “magic circle”, a term attributed to Johan Huizinga in *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* and later popularized by Eric Zimmerman and Katie Salen in *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*.

The magic circle, as shown in figure 1 below by Stanford Game Design Thinking (n.d), is the boundary between pretend and the real world, where an activity (game) will happen based on a set of rules and goals separate from reality and that requires the voluntary interaction of the participants (Salen & Zimmerman, 2013).

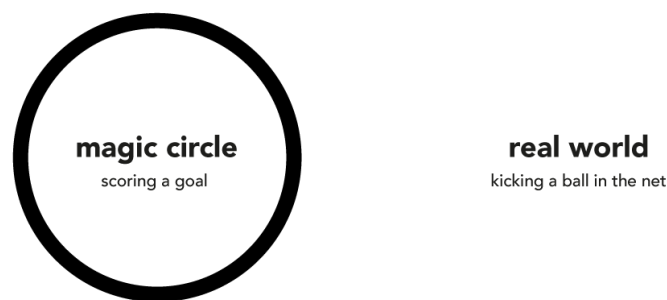


Figure 1: Magic circle
Source: Adapted from Stanford Game Design Thinking (n.d)

Whereas the “experiential qualities”, commonly used to define “gamefulness”, share similarities with the magic circle which refers to the state and requirements for an activity to be considered a game, the “structural systems” mentioned by McGonigal (2015) relate to the concepts of “rules” and “goals,” which are essential in any definition of games. An

example can be found in McGonigal’s same work, where she asserts that the purpose of playing a game is tied to achieving a specific desired outcome, which imbues the player with a sense of purpose motivated by clear goals, while Salen & Zimmerman (2004: p. 80) define games as “a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome”.

According to Deterding et al. (2011: p. 13), gamification involves “the use of design elements characteristic of games in non-game contexts”. This highlights the significance of understanding “gamefulness”, as a way to leverage the engaging aspects of games in various applications. “Gamefulness” as “the experiential and behavioural qualities” of gaming was only regarded as a phenomenon and characteristics that should be aimed for when designing gamified applications (considered under gameful design), shown in figure 2, keeping it separates but unavoidably related to games.

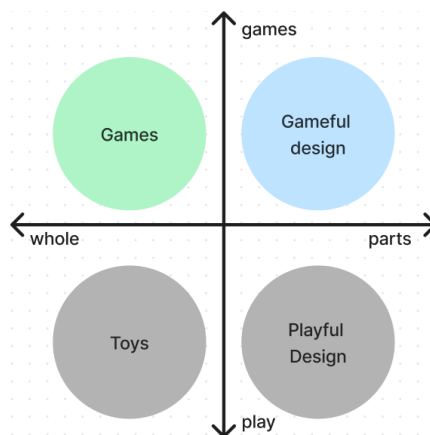


Figure 2: “Gamification” as a concept defined through and between game vs play and whole vs parts
Source: Deterding et al. (2011)

While the definitions of "gamefulness" often reference “characteristics” found in whole games, it can be argued that the experience of "gamefulness" is synonymous with games themselves as illustrated in figure 3. This perspective highlights that the essence of what makes a game engaging often resides in the experiential qualities that emerge during gameplay.

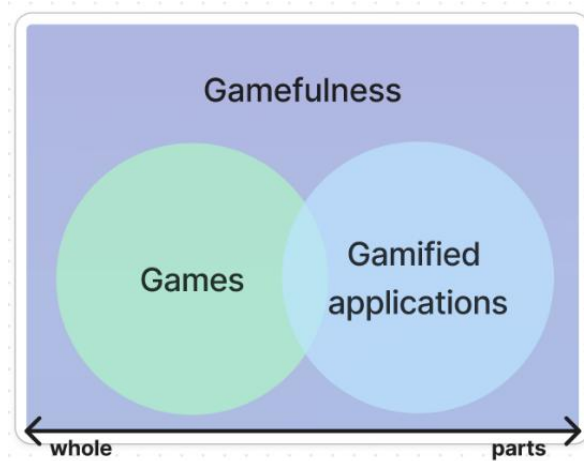


Figure 3: “Gamefulness” as the broader concept encompassing both games (product) and gamified applications
Source: Author's own elaboration

For instance, when players immerse themselves in a game, they undergo a transformation where they are not just participants but are actively engaged in a unique psychological state characterized by flow, challenge, and reward (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). This state is intrinsic to both the product and the activity of gaming, suggesting that gamefulness is not merely an attribute of games but rather a core component of the gaming experience itself.

It also highlights the importance of context, something Deterding et al. (2011) highlighted when discussing the reliance on the designer’s intentions or user experiences to “determine whether a given empirical system ‘is’ “a gamified application” or “a game” (p.14). Moreover, this notion aligns with the broader concept of ludic engagement, which refers to the playful interaction and exploration that games facilitate (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). When players engage with a game, they are not just following rules; they are experiencing a dynamic interplay of several elements such as narrative, mechanics, and social interaction that collectively define “gamefulness”.

However, it is important to distinguish between the product known as a "game" and the activity or state referred to as "games" to ensure clear communication and avoid ambiguity in a research context. Therefore, this dissertation will use the term "gamefulness" when discussing ideas or findings that pertain to the “experiential qualities of games”, even if those ideas originate from different terms.

2.2. Gameful Experience

While play and games have been a natural and intuitive part of humankind since ancient times, more formal approaches have emerged to understand games, their unique characteristics, and how the experience of playing games can be applied to non-game contexts. Although there is no universally accepted definition of “gamefulness,” it is possible to draw meaningful inferences from the literature by examining commonalities across proposed definitions and their core characteristics. These include: (1) the experience of a specific psychological state during gameplay; (2) the occurrence of this state within a defined space or system, whether real or virtual; and (3) engagement in an activity characterized by play and governed by its own set of rules. This distinction is particularly relevant for marketing research, as it allows scholars to isolate experiential outcomes from design features or technological affordances.

Landers et al. (2018) propose the replacement of “gamefulness” for three, more specific terms, illustrated in figure 4: the psychological state of gameplay, labelled “gameful experience”; the qualities and environments that create “gameful experiences”, labelled “gameful systems”, and the design process used to create “gameful experiences”, labelled “gameful design”.

Among these terms, “gameful experience” is particularly significant. According to Landers et al. (2018), it is defined as a psychological state that relies on interaction with goals perceived as non-trivial and achievable. This experience encompasses the

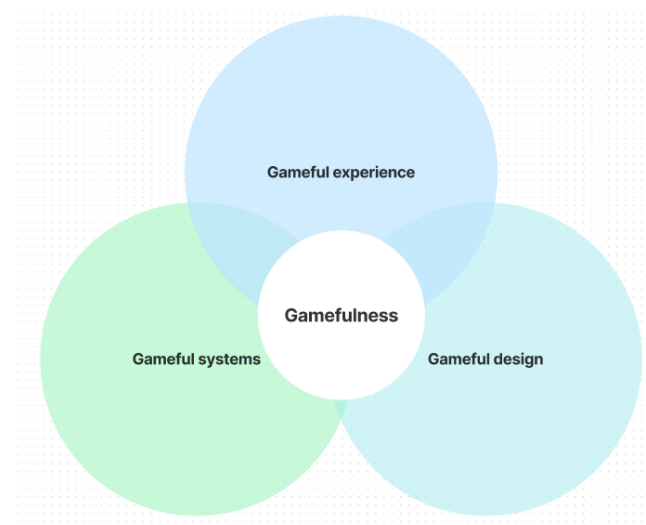


Figure 4: Concept of gamefulness
Source: Landers et al. (2018)

motivation to pursue these goals under arbitrary externally imposed constraints, along with the belief that all actions taken within these constraints are voluntary.

Similar concepts can be found in game design methodologies such as the Mechanics, Dynamics, and Aesthetics framework, often referred to as the MDA framework. The MDA framework was developed as part of the Game Design and Tuning Workshop at the Game Developers Conference, between 2001 and 2004, was a formal attempt at creating a methodology with which to decompose, study and create games from game systems, design goals, to the desired experiential results of gameplay. This is done by breaking down games into distinct components and establishing their design counterparts:

- 1) Mechanics, the parts of the game that are designed such as rules and possible actions;
- 2) Dynamics, the game in action, its parts interacting with each other and the player; and
- 3) Aesthetics, the state and emotional response in the player when interacting with the game (Hunicke et al., 2004).

The MDA framework (Mechanics, Dynamics, Aesthetics) presents a view of games as designed artifacts rather than mere media. In this context, the content of a game is its behaviour, driven by player interaction, rather than the media streaming towards the player.

From a designer's standpoint, game mechanics create dynamic system behaviours that, in turn, generate specific aesthetic experiences. Conversely, from a player's perspective, aesthetics set the tone for gameplay, which is reflected in observable dynamics and influenced by mechanics. This dual perspective—designer and player—reveals how changes in one layer can cascade and affect others, underscoring the importance of experience-driven rather than feature-driven design, as illustrated and summarized below (figure 5) in the same framework (Hunicke et al., 2004).

Further iterations of the framework have been proposed, one of which being DDE (standing for Design, Dynamic and Experience) that both adds to and redefines the terms proposed by the MDA framework. The replacement of Aesthetics for Experience, for instance, is done with the intent of clarifying that it stands for more than the art and philosophical aesthetics but the journey, experienced through space and time of the game, in other words, an experience (Walk et al., 2017). This change is supported by Hunicke's

own theory for the MDA framework - “In addition, thinking about the player encourages experience-driven (as opposed to feature-driven) design” (Hunicke et al., 2004: p. 2).

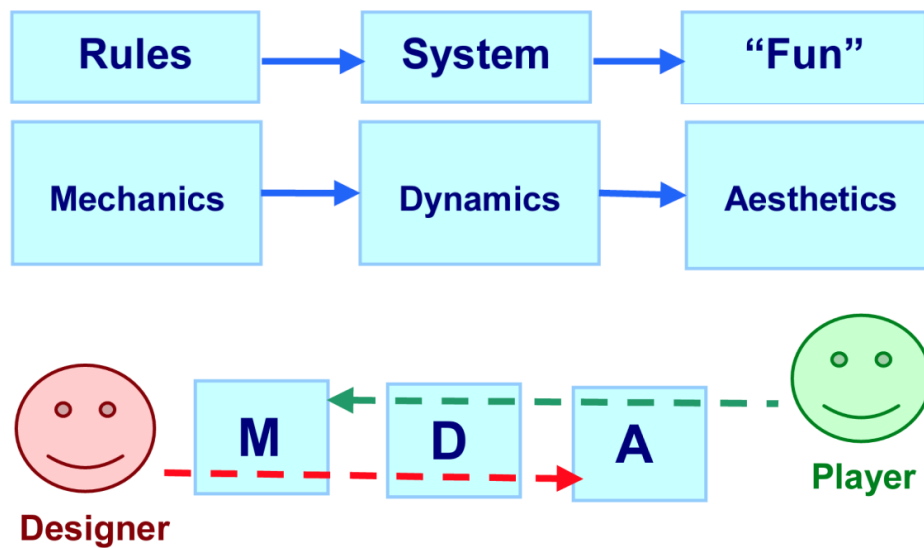


Figure 5: Different perspective between the designer and player
Source: Hunicke et al. (2004)

Some authors go further, saying gameful experience is “the positive emotional and involving qualities of using a gamified application” (Eppmann et al., 2018: p.100), relating “gameful experiences” to gamification and further distancing it from gaming. However as stated in the literature, there is a high level of subjectivity and contextuality in differentiating a “gamified application” from a “game” by needing to consider the designer’s intentions and the player’s experience (Deterding et al., 2011) as well as research indicating that “gameful experience”, elicited by gamified applications, is similar to the experience of playing traditional video games (Robson et al., 2015; Rodrigues, Oliveira & Costa, 2016).

Considering “gameful experience” as different from gaming experience through the context of utility (Högberg, 2019) would leave unclear where the metaverse, which includes gaming platforms like Roblox, as a new consumption paradigm would fall under as well as games that are designed to educate through entertainment. This could mean a growing limitation in research as findings demonstrate that consumers can perceive value from virtual products in the metaverse just as they do from consuming physical products in the material world (Henriksson & Svärth, 2023) and brands move to include these platforms and products in their overall strategy.

Therefore, much like “gamefulness”, while there is no universally adopted definition or application of the term “gameful experience”, commonalities can be found. For the purposes of this dissertation, "gameful experience" will be defined as the psychological state that arises from interacting with a system “that builds behaviour via interaction” (Hunicke et al., 2004), where the player exerts effort to influence the outcome, which is variable and quantifiable, and the activity is performed consensually.

2.3.Gameful Experience Dimensions

Over recent decades, both research and industry practices have shifted from focusing solely on pragmatic issues such as utility and usability to exploring emotions, enjoyment, user experience, and motivation. Researchers in the field of gaming psychology aim to analyse and explain why people are drawn to video games by applying various motivational theories to better understand player experience and motivation.

Player experience refers to the subjective experience a player has during and immediately after engaging in a game. This experience can be assessed along various dimensions, including flow, emotions, engagement, immersion, and presence, which are among the most widely studied in the literature (Caroux et al., 2015). However, the proliferation of these sometimes vague and overlapping constructs has created challenges in selecting the most appropriate psychological concepts for studying player experience (Bernhaupt, 2010). This complexity also presents challenges when researching gameful experiences and gamification.

Motivation is the psychological force that initiates and sustains goal-directed thoughts and behaviours (Wasserman & Wasserman, 2020). Games are deliberately designed to motivate players in various ways, both to enhance engagement and to cater to a broad audience. While early games such as *Pong* and *Tetris* primarily addressed the need for competence, modern video games tend to fulfil a wider array of psychological needs (Przybylski, Rigby & Ryan, 2010). The most widely cited empirical model in this area was created by Yee (2006), who developed a motivational framework for players of massive multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs). Drawing on Bartle's typology (1996) of player types in text-based virtual environments, Yee's model

categorizes gaming motives into three primary components—Achievement, Social, and Immersion—providing a comprehensive framework for understanding player motivations. However, Yee’s model, originally tailored for massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), faces limitations due to its genre-specific nature, as certain items within the model (e.g., "How important is it to you that your character's armor matches in colour and style?") are only relevant to certain types of games.

Table 1: Motivations for play in online games
Source: Yee (2006)

Achievement	Social	Immersion
Advancement (Progress, Power, Accumulation, Status)	Socializing (Casual chat, Helping others, Making friends)	Discovery (Exploration, Lore, Finding hidden things)
Mechanics (Numbers, Optimization, Templating, Analysis)	Relationship (Personal, Self-Disclosure, Finding and Giving support)	Role-playing (Storyline, Character history, Roles, Fantasy)
Competition (Challenging others, Provocation, Domination)	Teamwork (Collaboration, Groups, Achievements)	Customization (Appearances, Accessories, Style, Colour Schemes)
		Escapism (Relax, Escape from real life, Avoid real life problems)

Building on this, Quantic Foundry (Yee, 2015) proposed a broader framework encompassing twelve distinct motives across six clusters (e.g., Action, Social, Mastery, Achievement, Immersion, and Creativity). While more generalized, this model remains inaccessible to the scientific community due to copyright restrictions.

Other prominent scales in the study of gaming motives are the Motives for Online Gaming Questionnaire-MOGQ (Demetrovics et al., 2011; Wu et al., 2017) and the Videogaming Motives Questionnaire (López-Fernández et al., 2020). Although these scales cover a range of motives such as recreation, competition, fantasy, and coping, they too suffer from limitations, particularly in their genre specificity and the need for updates in response to technological advancements in gaming.

This gap in adaptable, universally applicable tools for measuring player motivation and experience is also seen in the field of gamification despite researchers noting the importance of measuring the experience as they directly relate to the success of the gamified system (Deterding et al., 2011).

The Gamex scale (Eppmann et al., 2018) addresses the limitations of previous motivational models by providing a more generalized tool for assessing both gaming and gamified contexts. The multidimensional nature of “gameful experience” is identified and measured by enjoyment, absorption, creative thinking, activation, absence of negative affect and dominance.

The following sections discuss each GAMEX dimension in detail, highlighting their relevance to both player experience and consumer brand responses.

2.3.1. Enjoyment

Enjoyment has been characterized as the core experience of all entertainment media (Vorderer et al., 2004) and is considered one of the key reasons for playing video games (Von der Heiden et al., 2019; Juul, 2003; Sweetser & Wyeth, 2005).

The use of different terminology across literature for the same construct makes it hard to achieve a definitive agreement as to what enjoyment is (Caroux et al., 2015). While not its sole determinant, enjoyment can be considered a contributor towards engagement (Crutzen et al., 2016) and most often studied in relation to theories of motivation.

Sensitivity theory (Reiss & Wiltz, 2004) defines enjoyment as the satisfaction of different needs, while the flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008) correlates enjoyment with the ability of being fully immersed in an activity with the right amount of skill and challenge. Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017) suggests all human behaviour is intrinsically motivated with the purpose of satisfying psychological needs and has been demonstrated to be a driver of enjoyment and engagement (Tamborini et al., 2010), Peng et al., 2012). Other studies approach enjoyment by dividing it into two separate concepts, hedonic and eudemonic experience. Hedonic experience is usually simplified “enjoyment,” and is associated with short-lived feelings of pleasure and excitement. Eudemonic experience, however, is associated with the achievement of deeper and more

enduring sensations and feelings (Mekler & Hornbaek, 2016; Oliver & Bartsch, 2010). Some research on eudemonic experiences shows a correlation between challenges created by game rules and emotional responses and appreciation by the player (Cole & Gillies, 2021), sharing some broad similarities with the idea of flow introduced by Csikszentmihalyi (1975).

These theories provide a base for the idea that enjoyment is a state achieved through the fulfilment of a person's needs that include physiological, cognitive, and affective components (Vorderer et al., 2004) through pleasure and satisfaction.

Positive emotions (e.g., enjoyment, pleasure) are vital part of playing games or using gamified systems and applications (McGonigal, 2011). In game design research, enjoyment, or more commonly "fun", is considered a desired outcome, rather than a component of games (Hunicke et al., 2004; Salen & Zimmerman, 2013). Some game designers propose a definition of "fun" as the catch all for the varied emotions a game can induce in a player, while others outright reject the use of the word as the stand-in term for such a complex phenomenon as the experience of games (Salen & Zimmerman, 2013). There is however a common effort in considering and categorizing the elements that will result in enjoyment, as seen in the MDA framework with Marc Leblanc's typologies of pleasure (Hunicke et al., 2004) or the "fundamental categories" in *Man, Play and Games* (Caillois, 1958). One model is not necessarily considered better than the other, both co-exist in research to offer baseline vocabulary with which to describe games and "how and why different games appeal to different players, or to the same players at different times" (Hunicke et al., 2004: p. 3).

Research supports that emotional desires or states will overrule cognitive and utilitarian decision-making regarding choice in products and their consumption (Dichter, 1960; Maslow, 1968). Games belong to class of intrinsically motivated consumer-behaviour, considered playful consumption, and like all intrinsically motivated experiences, requires the expenditure of time in an activity that is enjoyable in itself (Holbrook et al., 1984). Literature suggests that consumers favour memories of enjoyable experiences (Alba et al., 2013), their decisions can be influenced by affective responses triggered by a spontaneous stimulus (Shiv & Fedorikhin, 1999) and that enjoyment has a positive effect on consumer trust (Rouibah et al., 2016).

2.3.2. Absorption

Merriam-Webster (n.d) defines absorption as “entire occupation of the mind”, and immersion, a synonym, as “the act of immersing or the state of being immersed”. Eppmann et al. (2018) consider absorption a catch all to the related concepts of flow, immersion and presence. While immersion typically alludes to a state of deep mental involvement while retaining a degree of awareness of surroundings, presence refers to a state of involvement in a virtual experience as if it were reality (Crutzen et al., 2016) and could be considered as parts of the spectrum of the same phenomena.

Murray (2017: p. 99) describes the concept as seeking “the same feeling from a psychologically immersive experience that we do from a plunge in the ocean or swimming pool: the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality, as different as water is from air, that takes over all of our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus.”

We can consider two major perspectives on immersion in literature (figure 6): 1) psychological immersion, understood as a psychological state achieved when a user is involved, absorbed, engaged, or engrossed in an activity; and, 2) perceptual immersion, a set of characteristics of a system, aiming at achieving high fidelity displays of equivalent real-world stimuli, allowing it to be objectively determined and quantified (Agrawal et al., 2020).

Flow, as pioneered by Csikszentmihalyi (2008: p. 4), is a “state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it”,

While similar, flow and immersion should not be considered synonymous. Immersion can instead be considered a precondition of flow and is often preferred in game development research because of its ability to be assessed as a graded experience rather than a “all or nothing” experience like flow (Agrawal et al., 2020; Eppmann et al., 2018; Jennett et al., 2008).

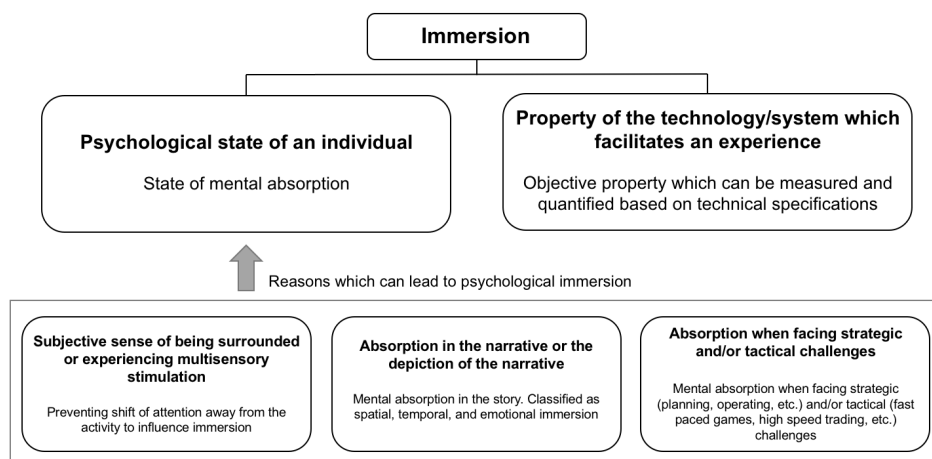


Figure 6: Defining Immersion
Source: Agrawal et al. (2020)

Finally, presence has been used to describe a sense of being present in an environment that while not real, might be hard to distinguish from reality, “a psychological state in which the virtuality of experience is unnoticed” (Lee 2004, p. 32). Presence is also seen in research as a multi-dimensional construct composed by: 1) spatial presence, relating to the ability of an user to feel like they are physically in the virtual environment and capable of interacting with it as if it was real; 2) social presence, that describes the feeling of coexisting with other beings (or users) in the virtual reality; and 3) self-presence, extension of the perception of the user’s own body to the avatar existing in the virtual reality (Caroux, 2023).

Presence and immersion are two concepts that are frequently studied to assess player experience and may be used interchangeably in research. However, while immersion describes a state of altered sensory perception, presence describes a state of altered psychological perception.

The differentiation is also seen in *Rules of Play* (Salen & Zimmerman, 2011) under immersion fallacy, the idea that the enjoyment of media can only be achieved through experiences in which the participant believes that what they are experiencing is reality firsthand (presence), rather than designed entertainment. These authors believe that immersion is achieved through play itself, a process of metacommunication that exists because the participant is aware of the artificiality of the play. If we take into

consideration VR experiences, designed to induce a state of altered perception in which virtual reality triggers the same responses as reality itself, both “immersion fallacy” and “immersion” as described in *Rules of Play* can coexist.

It is possible to conclude that immersion, flow and presence refer to cognitive and affective processes that take place while playing and can be considered determinants of engagement, as in, the motivation to play and the motivation to keep playing (Cruz et al., 2017).

In Marketing, being absorbed in a brand means to be fully concentrated and happily engaged in brand interaction to the point of losing a sense of time (Schaufeli et al., 2002) and engaged consumers are inclined to grant higher levels of attention and disposition to interact with a brand (Prentice & Loureiro, 2018). Emergent studies also consider a multidimensional nature to consumer-brand engagement, and absorption has been considered one of its determinants Dwivedi (2015) and that enjoyable experiences that engage customers have a positive effect on purchase intentions (Kaur et al., 2023).

Absorption and its relation to engagement is found in both marketing and game design research and both fields parallel similar tendencies: an immersed player has a higher chance of being engaged in a game, much like an immersed consumer is more likely to be engaged in the product or brand they are consuming.

2.3.3. Creative Thinking

Creativity is often discussed and related to arts-based activities such as painting, writing or music (Robson & Rowe, 2012). However, recent research efforts on creativity have considered it as “a capacity of human intelligence, rather than a subject or event” (Prentice, 2000: p. 150), a critical requirement for success (Resnick, 2008) and capable of evoking positive emotions in the form of personal satisfaction (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997).

Creative thinking lacks an agreed upon definition regardless of its widely accepted importance. Proposed definitions refer to creative think as “thinking that is novel and produces ideas that are of value” (Sternberg, 2003: p. 325) and “the capacity to generate

many different kinds of ideas, manipulate ideas in unusual ways and make unconventional connections in order to outline novel possibilities that have the potential to elegantly meet a given purpose” (Ramalingam et. al, 2020: p. 2).

Meadows (2006) analysis of creative thinkers identified a tendency towards choosing, rather than avoiding, challenges, tolerating risk and displaying the ability to both deal with uncertainty and enjoy complexity of tasks.

Motivation is also seen to have an impact upon creative behaviour. In the Intrinsic Motivation Principle of Creativity Theory by Amabile (1983) intrinsic motivators are seen as the force behind creativity, and therefore part of the process of creative thinking, while extrinsic motivators and constraints can be responsible for undermining creative behaviour. In the first stage of creative problem solving, motivation plays a key role as its responsible for determining whether and how a person will choose to address the problem at hand (Amabile & Pillemer, 2012).

Considering that games aim to be enjoyable and immersive, and both enjoyment and absorption are contributors towards motivation and engagement (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008; Crutzen et al., 2016), creativity will likely be part of an impact gameful experiences.

Creativity can itself be part of game dynamics. Expression, defined as “Experience of creating something or expressing oneself in a creative fashion” (Korhonen et al., 2009: p. 283), is part of the 22 assessed categories of the Playful Experience Framework. Expression, as in “games as self-discovery”, is also seen in the MDA framework as one of the eight categories that describe the types of experiences players can derive from games (Hunicke et al., 2004; Salen & Zimmerman, 2011). During the initial PLEX framework assessment, Korhonen et al. (2009) found that allowed expression in games was a component of the experience valued by players. This confirmation is also in line with Csikszentmihalyi’s (1997) considerations of creativity as a core component to human well-being and development.

Like the preference seen in players towards creating and expressing themselves in games, contemporary consumers have a preference towards value co-creation with brands,

effectively marking personalization as a must in today's marketing landscape (Islam et al., 2019, 2017; Marques, 2014).

Brands can also be part of consumers' expression, a reflection of their inner self and as means to enhance their social identity (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). Self-expressive brands are a driver of consumer-brand engagement (Leckie et al., 2016; Ndhlovu & Maree, 2023; Nyadzayo et al., 2020) as consumers tend to favour brands that display their values and self-expression (Hwang & Kandampully, 2012; Sprott et al., 2009).

2.3.4. Activation

Activation is closely related to, and often used interchangeably with, arousal in discussions of physical, physiological, behavioural, and mental states, as well as the levels of excitability and complexity associated with these processes (Lindsley, 1998). Arousal refers to a state of heightened physiological alertness and readiness, involving the activation of bodily systems such as increased heart rate, elevated blood pressure, and other physiological markers. It is linked to an emotion governed by a person's appraisal of the significance of an event or stimulus (APA Dictionary of Psychology, n.d). Activation, as defined in the Cambridge Dictionary, is "the act of making something start or making it start working" (Cambridge University Press, n.d.). This idea of activation as an act or process is also reflected in the APA Dictionary of Psychology, which refers to activation as "the process of alerting an organ or body system for action, particularly arousal of one organ or system by another" (American Psychological Association, n.d-b).

Both terms reflect states of heightened readiness and energy; however, research suggests that they can be conceptually distinguished. Arousal is typically described as the energetic state at a specific moment in time, representing the intensity of the physiological response, while activation encompasses the broader engagement of both physiological and cognitive processes necessary to initiate and sustain behaviour (Vaezmousavi, et. al, 2007; Vaezmousavi et. al., 2007-b). Together, these constructs operate synergistically in response to environmental demands, be it stimulus or tasks, contributing to both attention (memory) and performance (reaction).

Arousal and activation together contribute to a dynamic system where the physiological state of arousal provides the energy needed to respond to stimuli, while activation sustains and directs this response towards goal achievement. As described by LeDoux (2002), emotional arousal often guides behaviour towards or away from stimuli, with high arousal emotions driving heightened engagement, whereas low arousal states may prompt avoidance or withdrawal. Activation, in turn, supports this process by coordinating cognitive and physiological responses to optimize action.

The relationship between activation and arousal becomes even clearer when viewed through the lens of theories of emotion and motivation. The Circumplex Model of Arousal and Valence (Russel, 1980) places both arousal and activation within a broader framework of emotional experiences, mapping them along two axes: emotional intensity (arousal) and pleasantness or unpleasantness (valence). These dimensions provide a way to categorize and understand the varying levels of emotional engagement that people experience, from low-arousal, low-valence states (such as sadness) to high-arousal, high-valence states (such as excitement).

This thinking is reflected in the GAMEX model which applies the PAD (Pleasure, Arousal, Dominance) framework, by incorporating arousal (or activation) and dominance as distinct dimensions (Posner et al., 2005) – figure 7, alongside valence-based dimensions such as enjoyment and the absence of negative effects (Eppman, et. al, 2018).

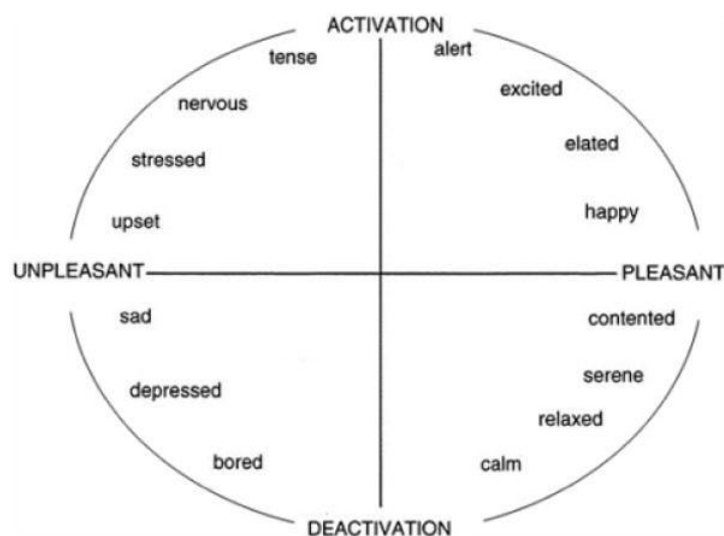


Figure 7: Graphical representation of the circumplex model of affect
Source: Posner et al. (2005)

Activation, in the context of game design and consumer behaviour, refers to the process of emotionally and cognitively engaging players/consumers by stimulating their interest and motivating their participation. This engagement is intricately connected to the reward systems built into games. Games, as interactive environments, evoke a wide range of emotions that can influence player engagement, behaviour, and overall experience. Many of these emotions, as referenced previously, fall under the umbrella of “fun”. Barwood (2000) emphasizes that such emotions contribute to the overall "fun" of the game, a term that, while broadly understood, can fail to capture the much more nuanced nature of emotional experiences in games (Barwood, 2000). The same sentiment is echoed by Apter (1991) in his essay "A Structural-Phenomenology of Play", focusing on the cognitive arousal of play where he offers a partial list of cognitive arousals as categories of game-induced emotions and components.

Psychologists have long studied how choice, action, reward, and punishment interact to influence behaviour. Ivan Pavlov and John B. Watson explored reflexive behaviour through classical conditioning (Gleitman, 1986) and this theory was later further refined placing higher importance on learned behaviour – called operant conditioning – by Skinner (2014). Skinner explains how behaviours are learned and maintained based on the consequences that follow them - strengthened through reinforcement or weakened through punishment. In the context of games, operant conditioning offers a framework for understanding how player actions are reinforced or discouraged through rewards and punishments.

Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that a game’s ability to evoke positive or negative emotional states, combined with the level of arousal experienced, plays a key role in how players perceive and react to in-game events. For example, reward systems (figure 8) contribute to the overall sense of pleasure and enjoyment, which, according to one of the many theories exemplified throughout this research, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of *flow*, hinges on the delicate balance between challenge and skill.



Figure 8: Graphical representation of a generic reward system
Source: Csikszentmihalyi (1975)

If a game consistently rewards players in ways that match their level of ability and challenge, it fosters a sense of achievement (high arousal) and keeps them activated in the gameplay experience. Conversely, games that fail to maintain this balance can lead to feelings of boredom or anxiety, states that hinder activation and engagement (Salen & Zimmerman, 2013). In this sense, activation and arousal serve as vital components in the emotional engagement that players experience while gaming. Activation, involving both physiological and cognitive responses, aligns with the emotional intensity (arousal) that players experience as they engage with the challenges and goals set by games and have a direct impact upon player motivation, satisfaction, and long-term engagement with the game. By considering how activation and arousal work in tandem to shape player emotions and behaviours, designers can refine their approach to gamefulness and emotional engagement, offering players rewarding experience.

These same principles apply when we consider brand activation. Brand activation refers to a strategic marketing process aimed at generating consumer interest, engagement, and action towards a brand (Saeed et al., 2015). As Aaker (1996) explains, it plays a vital role in building brand equity by linking marketing communication with the target audience and Liembawati et al., (2014) elaborates that experience-driven brand activations will result in enhanced customer satisfaction towards the brand and its products. When effectively executed, brand activation increases awareness, strengthens recognition, and builds long-term consumer relationships that drive repeat purchases and revenue growth (Alberts, 2009). Moreover, brand activations serve as valuable tools for collecting consumer data, informing future marketing strategies, and reinforcing the brand's identity (Dentsu, n.d.).

Games create immersive experiences that naturally trigger psychological activation, including heightened attention, arousal, and motivation. When a game is aligned with the brand's identity and messaging, these emotional responses become directly linked to the brand itself. In conclusion, activation serves as a foundational mechanism that initiates and sustains both physiological and cognitive engagement in response to internal or external stimuli. In applied settings like gaming and marketing, it is a desired outcome to shape experience and influence behaviour towards something.

2.3.5. Absence of negative affect

Negative affect is a term used to describe a range of unpleasant emotional states, such as anxiety, sadness, fear, anger, guilt, shame, and irritability (Watson, Clark & Tellegen, 1988). While the term "affect" has changed overtime, it is generally understood as "valenced feeling state," which means it refers to a process informed by emotions that are either negative or positive (Cohen & Areni, 1991).

Emotion is a form of affect, characterized by a strong and intense feeling linked to a specific stimuli or event. Unlike attitudes, which are evaluative judgments, affect is about the raw emotional experience a person feels in response to stimuli (Cohen & Areni, 1991). Negative affect, in particular, is linked to avoidance behaviours. According to valence theories, positive emotions tend to drive us towards action or engagement (approach motivation), while negative emotions often make us want to distance ourselves or withdraw (avoidance motivation) (e.g., Gray, 1987; Lang et. al., 1992). Affect plays a powerful role in shaping our thoughts and associations in line with these emotional states, which, in turn, influence our behaviours and decisions (Forgas, 2001).

Consumers often rely on brand impressions—overall, summary evaluations of a product—to guide their future purchasing decisions. These impressions are influenced by a combination of factors, including past experiences, emotions, and perceptions. Affect has long been recognized as a key driver of consumption behaviour (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982), with emotional responses playing a significant role in decision-making. Studies have shown that positive emotions, for example, can improve attitudes towards a brand and lessen the influence of logical evaluations when consumers assess

products (Batra & Stayman, 1990; Edell & Burke, 1987). This emotional influence is especially strong when consumers associate positive emotions with a brand, leading it to be more memorable and favourably recalled in future decisions (MacInnis & Stayman, 1993). In fact, research has also found that consumers often base their future decisions on the emotional impressions they have of a brand, even if they have forgotten the specific attributes that created those feelings (Burnstein & Schul, 1983) and both positive and negative affect have been shown to directly impact satisfaction, word-of-mouth behaviour, and complaints (Westbrook, 1987).

Similarly to consumer behaviour, a player's experience is informed by their perception of a game's attributes and systems such as rewards, punishments, and the outcomes of their actions within the game. In games with poor design, negative affect may arise for two reasons: a mismatch between the challenge level and the player's skill, or repetitive and monotonous gameplay. When the game presents challenges that are too difficult, players can feel anxious and out of control. On the flip side, if the game is too easy or doesn't offer enough variety in rewards, players are likely to get bored because they lose that sense of accomplishment (Salen & Zimmerman, 2013).

It is important to note that the complete absence of negative emotions in play is not the goal. As previously mentioned, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's Flow theory states a measure of challenge, matching the player's skill, to achieve a state of absorption. The ultimate goal, both for the game creator and the player, is to achieve a positive, pleasurable experience. Negative affect, in the context of player experience, refers to the overall impression or summary evaluation a player forms after interacting with the game. It is how the player feels about the experience once it is over, shaped by any frustrations, disappointments, or discomforts they may have encountered during gameplay.

Negative affect plays a crucial role in both consumer behaviour and interactive experiences like gaming. Emotions—whether positive or negative—have a powerful influence on our behaviours, decisions, and overall experiences. In consumer settings, emotions shape attitudes and brand impressions, while in gaming, they can determine whether a player stays engaged or becomes frustrated.

2.3.6. Dominance

In the context of video games, the concept of dominance plays a significant role in shaping players' engagement and emotional experiences. Central to player enjoyment and motivation are the basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, as outlined in self-determination theory. These needs, when satisfied, lead to a more fulfilling experience, while their frustration often results in disengagement, frustration, or dissatisfaction. dominance—players' sense of control and achievement within the game. When players encounter frustration but are still able to control their responses or adjust their expectations, they can continue to feel a sense of control and progress. The concept of dominance within games is intricately linked to players' satisfaction with their psychological needs. When these needs are frustrated, players experience a loss of control and mastery.

A key component of pleasure in games is the establishment and maintenance of a player's relationship to the goals within the game. While the goal itself is an essential construct within the game, its significance lies not in the goal itself but in how it shapes the player's overall experience. The game designer holds significant influence over the player's experience by defining the nature of the goal and determining the ways players must overcome adversity in pursuit of it. The ultimate goal, often the "win condition," serves as a broad framework, but it is the smaller, micro-level interactions—the frequent, repeated engagements with core mechanics—that sustain a player's interest and sense of control throughout the game.

The smaller, short-term goals that players achieve are intricately tied to the nature of the game and how goals are framed between the core mechanic and the larger objective. These smaller goals are crucial in maintaining player engagement as they contribute to a sense of progression and accomplishment, making the experience feel dynamic and rewarding. As players engage repeatedly with the game, they encounter the same core mechanic in various forms, each instance offering a slightly different challenge or reward. This constant balance between familiarity and novelty keeps the player's interest intact. Importantly, encouraging players to form and pursue their own goals within the game is a powerful way to foster a sense of control and investment. As Doug Church highlights in his essay "Formal Abstract Design Tools," games provide opportunities for players to

set both short-term, immediate goals and long-term, overarching objectives. These goals range from small, task-oriented objectives like "get over the bridge" to more complex, long-term challenges such as "collect all the red coins." Players often juggle multiple goals simultaneously, operating on different time scales, which further contributes to their investment and sense of control.

By providing a structure in which players can accumulate goals, plan their strategies, and act upon them, games create an environment where players feel empowered and engaged. This dynamic process of goal formation, action, and progression is central to the player's experience of dominance over the game world and fosters deeper involvement and enjoyment (Salen & Zimmerman, 2013).

2.4. Gameful Experience and Consumer-Brand Responses

The experiential perspective of consumption has long challenged purely rational and utilitarian explanations of consumer behaviour. Holbrook e Hirschman's (1982) seminal work on hedonic consumption emphasized that consumption experiences are inherently subjective, symbolic, and emotion-laden, highlighting the importance of fantasies, feelings, and fun in shaping consumer responses. This perspective provides a relevant theoretical foundation for examining gameful experiences in marketing contexts, as gameful systems are specifically designed to elicit experiential, emotional, and motivational states through interaction.

Consumer brand responses are commonly conceptualised as multidimensional, encompassing cognitive, affective, and behavioural components. Cognitive responses refer to consumers' brand-related knowledge, awareness, and beliefs; affective responses involve emotions, feelings, and attitudes towards the brand; and behavioural responses relate to actions such as purchase intentions, word-of-mouth communication, and loyalty behaviours (Batra & Keller, 2016; Keller, 1993). These dimensions are interrelated and collectively shape overall brand evaluations and long-term consumer-brand relationships.

Gameful experiences are particularly effective in influencing consumer brand responses due to their ability to generate deep psychological engagement. Research in both gaming

and marketing contexts suggests that experiential states such as enjoyment and absorption enhance attention, emotional involvement, and memorability, thereby strengthening brand-related attitudes and evaluations (Calder, Malthouse & Schaedel, 2009; Vorderer et al., 2004). Enjoyable and immersive experiences have been shown to foster positive affect towards brands, increase satisfaction, and encourage continued interaction with branded content.

In addition to affective responses, gameful experiences can shape cognitive outcomes by promoting active participation, exploration, and learning. Interactive environments encourage consumers to process brand-related information more deeply than passive exposure, leading to enhanced brand knowledge and stronger associative memory structures (Ahn, Seo, & Jung, 2015; Schmitt, 1999). Moreover, opportunities for creative thinking and self-expression within gameful systems allow consumers to incorporate brands into their self-concept, reinforcing self-brand connections and brand identification (Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006).

From a behavioural perspective, the motivational and activating properties of gameful experiences can stimulate approach-oriented behaviours, such as participation, sharing, and advocacy. Activation and perceived dominance—understood as feelings of control, competence, and agency—are associated with increased engagement, persistence, and intention to interact with the brand beyond the immediate experience (Hamari et al., 2016; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Conversely, the presence of negative affect during an experience may lead to frustration, disengagement, and unfavourable brand associations, undermining the effectiveness of gameful brand initiatives (Westbrook, 1987).

Taken together, these insights suggest that gameful experience functions as a central experiential mechanism through which branded games and gamified environments influence consumer brand responses. Rather than relying solely on the inclusion of game elements, the effectiveness of such initiatives depends on the quality of the psychological states they evoke. Accordingly, adopting a multidimensional perspective on gameful experience - such as the Gameful Experience (GAMEX) framework - offers a valuable lens for understanding how branded game environments shape consumers' cognitive, affective, and behavioural responses towards brands.

3. Research Method

The research method consists of a detailed description of all the steps taken during the research process. It is an essential element in the development of a scientific project, since it determines the rigor, coherence, and validity of the conclusions reached (Creswell & Creswell, 2021).

3.1. Method

This study adopts an exploratory qualitative case study approach grounded in an interpretivist epistemological stance. Given that gameful experience is conceptualised as a subjective psychological state, an interpretive lens is particularly appropriate to analyse how experiential dimensions are embedded in and conveyed through a branded digital environment.

Exploratory research aims to investigate underdeveloped areas of inquiry by generating insights and conceptual understanding rather than testing predetermined hypotheses (Swedberg, 2020). In the context of this dissertation, the experiential mechanisms linking gameful systems and consumer brand responses remain insufficiently examined, thus justifying an exploratory orientation.

Given the experiential, psychological, and context-dependent nature of gameful experiences, a qualitative methodology was deemed appropriate. Qualitative research allows for a richer and more nuanced understanding of subjective perceptions, symbolic meanings, and experiential structures, which are central to the concept of gameful experience. This approach is especially relevant when examining complex interactions between consumers and brands within immersive and interactive digital environments, where meaning is constructed through participation rather than passive exposure.

Rather than seeking statistical generalization, this study aims for analytical generalization, contributing to theoretical refinement regarding the application of the Gameful Experience (GAMEX) framework in branded game contexts.

3.2. Research Strategy: Case Study

The research strategy adopted in this study is a single-case study focusing on a branded game developed by the brand Vans. The case study approach is particularly appropriate when the objective is to obtain an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon within its real-life context (Coombs, 2022).

In this dissertation, the case study enables a detailed examination of how gameful experience dimensions are structurally embedded in a branded game environment and how these experiential dimensions may influence consumer brand responses at cognitive, affective, and behavioural levels.

The case of Vans World was selected for three main reasons:

- a) The brand's strong cultural positioning within youth, creativity, and lifestyle branding;
- b) Its strategic investment in immersive and interactive digital environments;
- c) The structural richness of the branded game, which incorporates exploration, customization, social interaction, and challenge-based mechanics aligned with the Gameful Experience (GAMEX) framework.

The case is therefore instrumental rather than representative: it serves as a theoretically relevant instance through which to examine the experiential mechanisms under investigation.

3.3. Data Collection

Data collection was conducted through multiple qualitative sources to ensure contextual depth and analytical triangulation.

First, an extensive bibliographic review was carried out to establish the theoretical foundations of the research. This review drew on interdisciplinary literature from game studies, psychology, human-computer interaction, and marketing, informing both the conceptual framework and the analytical categories applied in the empirical analysis.

Second, contextual and descriptive data related to the Vans branded game were collected.

These data include:

- a) Direct observation of the game environment and its interactive features;
- b) Analysis of game mechanics, progression systems, reward structures, and customization options;
- c) Examination of narrative elements and environmental design;
- d) Publicly available brand communications and official materials related to Vans World.

The unit of analysis consisted of identifiable game design elements and interaction structures within Vans World that could be conceptually associated with one or more dimensions of the Gameful Experience (GAMEX) framework. This multi-source qualitative approach strengthens contextual understanding and reduces reliance on a single data stream.

3.4.Data Analysis

The data analysis followed a qualitative deductive content analysis approach guided by the Gameful Experience (GAMEX) framework (Eppmann et al., 2018). The six predefined dimensions of gameful experience—enjoyment, absorption, creative thinking, activation, absence of negative affect, and dominance—served as analytical categories.

The analytical procedure involved three stages:

- a) Identification of relevant game elements and interaction features within Vans World;
- b) Systematic mapping of these elements onto the corresponding GAMEX dimensions based on conceptual alignment with theoretical definitions established in the literature review;
- c) Interpretative analysis of how these experiential dimensions may shape consumer brand responses at cognitive, affective, and behavioural levels.

This process was interpretative rather than positivist. The objective was not to measure players' psychological states empirically, but to assess how the structural characteristics of the branded game are designed to facilitate specific experiential outcomes.

By mapping the characteristics of the Vans branded game against the dimensions of gameful experience, the study provides a structured yet flexible analytical framework that supports theoretical reflection rather than empirical generalization. The emphasis is placed on conceptual coherence and theoretical contribution rather than statistical inference.

To enhance analytical rigor, interpretations were continuously cross-referenced with existing literature on gameful systems, player motivation, and consumer-brand engagement, ensuring theoretical consistency and reducing speculative interpretation.

4. Case report – Vans and Vans World

4.1. Roblox as an Immersive Brand Environment

In recent years, Roblox has evolved beyond a gaming platform into a highly immersive digital ecosystem characterised by user-generated content, persistent virtual environments, and sustained social interaction. Unlike traditional social media platforms centred primarily on content consumption, Roblox enables participatory experiences in which users explore, create, and interact within shared virtual spaces.

Industry analysis identifies Roblox as one of the most deeply engaging social platforms globally, with users spending extensive periods of time within its interactive environments (Gustavii, 2026). This structural and experiential orientation provides brands with opportunities to move beyond exposure-based communication strategies towards immersive and culturally embedded engagement.

4.2. Vans: Brand Identity and Strategic Positioning

Vans was founded in 1966 in California, by brothers Paul and Jim Van Doren, along with partners Gordon Lee and Serge D'Elia under the name "Van Doren Rubber Company". The company's initial focus was on creating custom footwear, with a unique selling proposition of allowing customers to select colours and styles (Vans, n.d.). The launch of the Vans #44 marked the brand's rise to popularity as Vans positioned itself as the go-to brand for skateboarders as the sport gained traction in the early 1970's. During the 1970s, the company rebranded to the name "Vans", in line with the vernacular used by its main customer base audience (Tenue de Nîmes, 2020). By 1976, Vans collaborated with professional skateboarders to design new and improved shoes catering directly to the needs of skaters and by the end of the decade it had expanded to over 70 stores in California and selling internationally through dealers and partners (Vans, n.d.).

During the 80's, the brand expanded its production of shoes and gear with the intention of targeting other popular sports, deviating from its original core audience. Despite its previous success, Vans had to file for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection and goes through a reorganisation in 1984. Three years later, Vans had paid all creditors and was debt free

and in 1991 went public with shares traded at 14\$ on their debut date (Surfer Today, 2020).

The 1990s and early 2000s marked a significant transition for Vans, as it sought to appeal to a wider demographic, which allowed it to stay relevant amidst changing consumer preferences. This is seen in 1995 with the launch of the Vans Warped Tour, a traveling music festival that showcased punk rock and alternative music. This event not only reinforced Vans' connection to youth culture but also helped it reach a broader audience (Tenue de Nîmes, 2020). The introduction of new lines such as the Vans Old Skool and Sk8-Hi catered to both skaters and fashion-conscious consumers. These models became iconic, transcending their original purpose and becoming staples in mainstream fashion (Surfer Today, 2020).

In recent years, Vans has embraced collaborations with various artists, designers, and cultural icons, further solidifying its status as a lifestyle brand. Collaborations with figures such as Jeff Staple and brands like Fear of God have expanded Vans' appeal, blending skate culture with high fashion (Tenue de Nîmes, 2020).

Vans is dedicated to a set of core values that emphasise creativity, individuality, and community, positioning the brand as one that resonates profoundly with its audience, particularly younger generations like Gen Z. The brand's mission is to inspire and empower individuals to live "Off The Wall," embodying a youthful spirit characterized by freedom, non-conformity, and relentless progression. Vans believes that what was once considered an "Off The Wall" moment becomes the new norm, driving the brand to continuously strive for improvement in collaboration with its global communities (Vans, n.d-b). At the core of Vans' operations are five key values that influence all aspects of the brand's culture and initiatives:

1. Effortless Authenticity: We embrace those who are unapologetically themselves.
2. Radical Creativity: Creativity remains key to everything we do.
3. Unconventional Community: We are inclusive and connected to our consumers, our communities and each other.
4. Relentless Passion: We listen to our people, our athletes and our consumers.

5. Playful Irreverence: We see through the eyes of youth and celebrate the underdog spirit, so we never take ourselves too seriously. (Vans, n.d-b).

These values also extend to Vans' strategies in online communities, such as Roblox. The platform provides an avenue for innovative storytelling and brand experiences that traditional marketing methods cannot achieve. By embedding itself within the gaming and social fabric of Roblox, Vans not only enhances its visibility but also cultivates an emotional connection with users (Marketing Dive, 2022).

Individual expression is deeply embedded in skate culture, and Vans has been supporting and enabling this exact type of creativity for more than 50 years. With the Vans World experience on Roblox, we are empowering creative expression in the digital world, bridging the gap between virtual and real-world fashion and sports in an accessible, inclusive way. Vans is a global icon and advocate for youth culture, and we're thrilled to bring this authentic brand experience to the millions of Vans enthusiasts where they are — on Roblox (Street as cited in Vans, n.d).

Vans has navigated the complexities of cultural trends while remaining true to its roots in skateboarding. Its ability to adapt and innovate has allowed it to thrive in a competitive market, making it not just a shoe company, but a significant player in the world of music, art, and youth culture.

4.3. Vans World: Concept and Experiential Design

In 2021, Vans launched Vans World on Roblox, creating an interactive virtual environment designed to engage users through skateboarding experiences, fashion customization, and social interaction. This initiative was part of a broader strategy to connect with younger audiences in spaces where they are increasingly spending their time (Marketing Dive, 2022). The immersive experience allows players to skate in a digital replica of iconic Vans locations, offering both entertainment and brand engagement. Julia Patkowski, Senior Manager of Global Brand Marketing at Vans is quoted as saying “We plan on building and learning from the community and updating it and creating a true, unique experience that evolves with what we hear from the community” in a Fast Company (2021) article.

Following the success of the original Vans World, a refreshed experience was released in 2024, The Vans 2.0. This update revitalizes the classic designs and includes updated collaborations with popular artists and influencers and tests of “virtual launches of real-world products by giving Roblox users a first look at new shoe the Mixxa” ahead of its physical release (Marketing Dive, 2024).

Vans World 2 continues to allow players to practice tricks with their friends, now with the addition of other iconic landmarks, like Paris and Tokyo, and with the presence of Lizzie Armanto, a prominent female pro skater (The Drum, 2024). Drieke Leenknecht, Vans' global chief marketing officer, emphasized the brand's focus on delivering innovative experiences on digital platforms. She noted that as Vans shifts towards a "phygital" approach to storytelling, they collaborated with The Gang “to create a next-generation game that elevates skate in the digital world with touches that represent real world skateboarding progression” (Leenknecht, as cited in Marketing Dive, 2024).



Figure 9: Vans World reaches 100 million players on Roblox
Source: Marketing Dive (2024)

Roblox allows users to create and share their own games, or "experiences," which can vary widely in style and genre. The term “experience” aims to convey the immersive quality of the platform, "Each experience is designed to be a unique and immersive environment where players can interact, create, and explore" (Roblox, n.d.).

Although it is indisputable that games are as old as humankind and video games are one of the most popular and profitable forms of entertainment, there's no simple or universal answer to what is the reason that leads people to play games or what is an optimal player experience. Creating a compelling player experience involves understanding the emotions or themes the game seeks to convey, such as excitement, solitude, or hope. It is essential to avoid vague terms like "fun," and instead, articulate more specific emotional experiences, such as the thrill of performing a new trick, or the camaraderie of shared moments.

4.3.1. Game environment

When it comes to "Vans World" is easy to look at the game and describe it as wanting to immerse players in skateboarding culture, incorporating authentic tricks, environments, and challenges that resonate with the skate community - a message very much in line with the brand "ethos". But "Vans World" is more than a message, and as established in this dissertation, regardless of lack of consensus on what to call it as a "product" (advertisement, gamification, game, advergaming), it possesses all the characteristics required to be considered under gamefulness and its player's experience considered a gameful experience.

Player experience is shaped through all its elements like colour tones, music, and visual design, but also through game mechanics, level design, and player interactions and it is key that each aspect of the game supports the desired emotional tone (Rodolfo, 2021). While it is only possible to speculate on the design decisions and processes behind Vans World, it is likely the desired player experience is reflected in the game mechanics and words used to describe the game.

YOUR WORLD, YOUR RULES - Welcome to Vans World, an "Off The Wall" Roblox experience! From the sandy beaches to the iconic House of Vans, this massive skate park is just waiting for you to explore. Hang out with your friends and compete to see who can pull off the most insane tricks, take on daily challenges, and customize your own Vans gear and skateboard to show off your unique style. Drop in, it is your world to create (Vans, n.d).

The game world is designed with multiple environments, including skate parks, urban settings, and themed areas that encourage exploration. Players can discover hidden areas, collect items, and interact with the environment, adding layers to the gameplay. This describes an experience designed to appeal to players who are driven to explore and collect power, rare items or collectibles. Explorer-type players are primarily motivated by curiosity, environmental interaction, and the intrinsic reward of discovery. Unlike achievement-driven players, their engagement is sustained through non-linear progression, hidden content, and narrative ambiguity.

Creating a welcoming environment that encourages players to connect, collaborate, compete and share experiences, often through events and social features is clearly emphasized in the game’s overview as described by Vans. This fulfills both potential social clusters – competition and community - as described in Quantic Foundry’s motivation model (2015) – figure 10.

DETAIL SOCIAL CLUSTER

Competition	Community
<p>Gamers who score high on this component enjoy competing with other players, often in <u>duels, matches, or team-vs-team scenarios</u>.</p> <p>Competitive gameplay can be found in titles like <i>Starcraft</i>, <i>League of Legends</i>, or the PvP Battlegrounds in <i>World of Warcraft</i>. But competition isn’t always overtly combative; competitive players may care about being acknowledged as the best healer in a guild, or having a high ranking/level on a Facebook farming game relative to their friends.</p>	<p>Gamers who score high on Community enjoy <u>socializing and collaborating with other people</u> while gaming. They like chatting and grouping up with other players.</p> <p>This might be playing <i>Portal 2</i> with a friend, playing <i>Mario Kart</i> at a party, or being part of a large guild/clan in an online game. They enjoy being part of a team working towards a common goal. For them, games are an integral part of maintaining their social network.</p>

Figure 10: Quantic Foundry’s motivation model
 Source: Quantic Foundry (2015)

The game showcases a colourful, stylized aesthetic that reflects both the Vans brand and the energetic vibe of skate culture – in fact, immersing players in skate culture through the lenses of “Vans” as a brand is the objective. Colour is thought to impact people's

affect, cognition, and behaviour (Elliot & Maier, 2014) and help memorization, recall, and recognition. “It can suggest categories and give identity to chunks of information. This can create a design that is more efficient, clearer and easier to understand, easier to learn, and easier to navigate” (Karr, 2013).

The use of bright colours in Roblox games can enhance player engagement, emotional responses, and overall user experience, further supported by findings from Mirikivi, Tuunainen & Nguyen (2017), and Kokil (2018), that indicate that visually stimulating environments enhance user satisfaction and encourage prolonged interaction. Collectively, these findings emphasize the importance of incorporating bright colours in game design to foster a more engaging and enjoyable player experience and while this is the use of bright colours on the platform is not exclusive to Vans World, the same principles still apply.



Figure 11: Screenshot from Vans World 2

Source: Screenshot captured by the author during gameplay [05/10/2024]

4.3.2. Customization

Vans World offers extensive customization options that allow players to personalize both their avatars and their in-game experiences. Players can customize clothing, accessories, skateboards, and movement styles using branded Vans items, reinforcing the brand's identity while enabling creative self-expression.

From a gameful experience perspective, customization strongly supports the creative thinking and dominance dimensions of the GAMEX framework. By allowing players to make meaningful aesthetic and functional choices, the game encourages autonomy and personal agency, which are central to intrinsically motivated behaviour. These features also align with literature on self-expressive brands, as players use Vans-branded items to construct and communicate identity within a social environment.

Customization therefore functions not only as a gameplay mechanic but also as a branding tool, embedding Vans into the player's self-concept and reinforcing emotional connections with the brand.

4.3.3. Socialization

Social interaction is a central component of Vans World, facilitated through shared spaces, multiplayer activities, chat functions, and collaborative events. Players can skate together, participate in events, and observe or imitate other users' styles and behaviours.

This social layer enhances absorption and enjoyment, while also contributing to activation through continuous social stimuli. The presence of other players transforms Vans World into a living environment rather than a static branded experience, increasing time spent in-game and emotional investment.

From a marketing standpoint, socialization reinforces brand communities, enabling peer-to-peer interaction around shared cultural symbols associated with Vans, such as skateboarding, creativity, and youth culture. These interactions contribute to social presence and strengthen brand attachment through shared experience.

4.3.4. Challenges

Challenges in Vans World are structured around skateboarding tasks, missions, and progression systems that reward skill development and exploration. These challenges are designed to balance difficulty and accessibility, allowing players of varying skill levels to participate.

Challenges directly support the activation, enjoyment, and dominance dimensions of gameful experience. By setting achievable yet engaging goals, the game fosters a sense of competence and progression, key elements in sustaining motivation and flow.

Importantly, failure within these challenges carries low negative consequences, minimizing negative affect and encouraging experimentation. This design choice aligns with Vans' brand values of creativity, freedom, and non-conformity, reinforcing positive brand associations.

The game frequently hosts events and challenges, keeping the content fresh and engaging. Players can participate in contests, earn rewards, and showcase their skills, which helps maintain long-term interest.

4.4.Engagement Metrics and Platform Relevance

Since its launch, *Vans World* has achieved substantial user engagement, surpassed 130 million cumulative visits and generated more than 8 million hours of interaction within the virtual skatepark environment (Rolimon's, n.d.; BeyondGames.biz, 2023). The official Vans Roblox group includes over 203,000 members, reflecting sustained community participation and continued interest in the branded experience (Rolimon's, n.d.).

These engagement indicators suggest a significant degree of brand–user interaction within the platform ecosystem, reinforcing the empirical relevance of this case study.

Industry analysis further identifies Roblox as one of the most deeply engaging social platforms globally, characterised by high levels of time spent and immersive social interaction (Gustavii, 2026). Unlike traditional social media environments, Roblox enables brands to participate in culturally embedded and interactive experiences that resonate particularly strongly with younger demographics. This broader platform relevance strengthens the justification for examining branded experiences such as *Vans World* within Roblox's ecosystem.

4.5. The impact of Vans World

Since its launch, Vans World has achieved significant engagement metrics, with over 100 million visits recorded within a short period (Fashion Network, 2024). This level of interaction underscores the effectiveness of Vans' strategy to leverage the metaverse as a platform for brand immersion. While visitation rates indicate substantial platform traffic, sustained engagement is inferred from the platform's interactive design and reported behavioural metrics.

The social aspect of Vans World is pivotal to its success. Users can interact with friends, participate in events, and share experiences, fostering a sense of community around the Vans brand. This element aligns with current trends in digital marketing, where community engagement is essential for brand relevance among younger consumers (Vans, n.d.). By creating a space where users can connect and express themselves, Vans enhances its cultural significance in skateboarding and broader lifestyle communities.

According to a study published by Roblox Corporation (2024), engagement within the game enhances brand affinity and encourages positive consumer perceptions. The immersive nature of Roblox allows users to interact with brands in creative and meaningful ways, fostering deeper emotional connections.

The study indicates that players who engage with branded experiences are more likely to develop a favourable view of those brands. Specifically, 70% of respondents reported that their experience within a game environment positively influenced their perceptions of the brand involved. Furthermore, the interactive elements, such as avatar customization and social interaction, provide opportunities for consumers to express their identity through the brands they choose, reinforcing brand loyalty.

Additionally, the study found that user-generated content related to brands not only enhances brand visibility but also encourages community participation and advocacy. This shift from passive consumption to active participation enables brands to cultivate a loyal customer base, as users feel a sense of ownership and connection to the brands they interact with in-game (Roblox Corporation, 2024).

5. Discussion

This chapter discusses the findings of the case study of *Vans World on Roblox* in light of the theoretical framework presented earlier, particularly the concept of gameful experience and the Gameful Experience (GAMEX) framework. Rather than reiterating descriptive elements of the case, this discussion focuses on interpreting how the identified gameful experience dimensions contribute to consumer brand responses and how these findings relate to existing literature in game studies, experiential marketing, and consumer behaviour.

The findings suggest that branded game environments can function not merely as gamified communication tools but as fully-fledged experiential systems capable of generating multidimensional psychological states. This reinforces Landers et al.'s (2018) distinction between gameful systems and gameful experiences, while extending its application into brand engagement literature.

This shift from element-based analysis to experiential interpretation is particularly relevant in immersive branded environments such as *Vans World*.

Overall, the findings suggest that *Vans World* successfully operationalizes key dimensions of gameful experience, namely enjoyment, absorption, creative thinking, activation, and dominance. These dimensions interact dynamically to shape a cohesive experiential environment that aligns closely with Vans' brand identity and strategic objectives. The case study supports the argument that the effectiveness of branded games does not depend merely on the presence of game mechanics, but on the quality of the psychological states elicited during interaction.

Enjoyment emerges as a central dimension of the gameful experience in *Vans World*. The playful nature of skateboarding mechanics, combined with a visually coherent environment and culturally meaningful activities, fosters positive affect and sustained engagement. This finding is consistent with prior research emphasizing enjoyment as a key driver of both player engagement and positive consumer brand responses. In marketing contexts, enjoyable interactive experiences have been shown to enhance brand

attitudes, memorability, and emotional resonance, suggesting that enjoyment functions as a foundational mechanism through which branded games influence consumer perceptions.

Closely related to enjoyment is the dimension of absorption, which is strongly supported by the open-ended structure of the game environment. *Vans World* allows players to explore freely, engage at their own pace, and pursue self-directed goals, facilitating immersive engagement and prolonged interaction. This design approach aligns with flow theory and previous studies highlighting the role of autonomy and environmental exploration in sustaining absorption. The findings indicate that explorer-type players, in particular, benefit from such design choices, as their motivation is driven by curiosity, discovery, and environmental interaction rather than rigid progression systems.

Creative thinking is another prominent dimension identified in the case study. Extensive customization options enable players to personalize avatars, skateboards, and movement styles using Vans-branded elements. These features encourage experimentation, identity construction, and self-expression within the game environment. From a consumer behaviour perspective, this supports the notion that brands facilitating creative engagement and self-expression are more likely to foster emotional attachment and self-brand connections. In *Vans World*, creative thinking functions not only as a gameplay dimension but also as a strategic branding mechanism that embeds the brand within the player's sense of identity.

Activation and dominance are reinforced through the design of challenges and progression systems that balance difficulty and accessibility. The game offers structured activities that reward skill development and exploration while maintaining low negative consequences for failure. This balance promotes a sense of competence, control, and agency, which are central to intrinsic motivation and sustained engagement. Importantly, minimizing punitive outcomes reduces negative affect, which is particularly relevant in branded environments where frustration may transfer to unfavourable brand associations. The absence of strong negative affect further contributes to a positive overall experience. While moments of challenge and frustration are inherent to gameplay, *Vans World* mitigates their impact through forgiving mechanics and flexible engagement paths. This finding aligns with literature suggesting that while some level of challenge is necessary

for meaningful engagement, excessive frustration undermines both player experience and brand perception. In this sense, the game successfully maintains an optimal balance between challenge and enjoyment.

Taken together, these findings highlight the multidimensional nature of gameful experience and its relevance for understanding consumer brand responses in branded game environments. The case study demonstrates that enjoyment, absorption, creative thinking, activation, and dominance do not operate in isolation but collectively shape an experiential ecosystem that supports positive cognitive, affective, and behavioural outcomes. These outcomes include increased engagement, favourable brand attitudes, and stronger emotional connections with the brand.

From a theoretical standpoint, the discussion reinforces the value of adopting an experiential perspective when examining gamification and branded games. The findings support the use of the GAMEX framework as a comprehensive lens for analysing how gameful experiences function as mediating mechanisms between interactive design and consumer responses. By focusing on psychological states rather than surface-level mechanics, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how branded games can create meaningful and effective brand experiences.

Overall, the findings suggest that gameful experience operates as a mediating experiential mechanism between interactive design and consumer brand responses. Rather than functioning as isolated psychological states, the dimensions of enjoyment, absorption, creative thinking, activation, and dominance appear to form an interconnected experiential system. This system facilitates cognitive engagement, emotional attachment, and identity expression, thereby shaping favourable brand perceptions. These findings contribute to clarifying the central research question by demonstrating that gameful experiences influence consumer responses through experiential immersion and symbolic alignment rather than through instrumental reward structures alone.

6. Conclusions

6.1. Summary of the Results

This dissertation set out to examine how gameful experiences influence consumer brand responses within branded game environments. The findings indicate that gameful experience functions as a multidimensional experiential mechanism mediating the relationship between interactive design and consumer–brand engagement. Rather than relying solely on structural game elements, branded environments generate meaningful consumer responses when they elicit psychologically rich states such as enjoyment, absorption, and creative agency. Consequently, gameful experience emerges not as a peripheral feature of digital branding strategies, but as a central experiential driver shaping consumer perception, emotional attachment, and brand-related meaning-making.

The findings further demonstrate that the dimensions of enjoyment, absorption, creative thinking, activation, and dominance operate not as isolated experiential states, but as interrelated components of a cohesive experiential system. In the case of *Vans World*, these dimensions collectively fostered identity expression, emotional resonance, and sustained interaction. Rather than being incidental by-products of gameplay, they functioned as core mechanisms through which users constructed meaningful relationships with the brand within an immersive digital ecosystem.

A central conclusion of this study is that the effectiveness of branded games does not depend primarily on the mere presence of game mechanics or structural elements. Rather, it is the quality and intensity of the psychological states elicited during interaction that shape consumer responses. This insight reinforces the relevance of the Gameful Experience (GAMEX) framework as a robust analytical lens for understanding the experiential mechanisms underpinning branded game environments.

Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of aligning gameful experiences with brand values and cultural identity. *Vans World* exemplifies how the integration of skate culture, creativity, and self-expression into game design can generate an authentic and

coherent brand experience. Such alignment strengthens emotional connections with consumers and enhances brand relevance within digital and youth-oriented cultures.

The findings should also be interpreted within the broader characteristics of the Roblox ecosystem in which *Vans World* is embedded. As discussed in Chapter 4, Roblox constitutes an immersive and socially interactive platform that fosters sustained user engagement (Gustavii, 2026). This contextual environment may amplify experiential mechanisms such as enjoyment, activation, and creative immersion, thereby strengthening the relationship between gameful experience and consumer–brand responses.

The substantial engagement metrics observed in *Vans World* further reinforce the practical relevance of these experiential dynamics. Consequently, the effects identified in this study should not be understood in isolation, but rather as embedded within a platform architecture specifically designed to promote interactive, participatory, and socially driven experiences.

Overall, this dissertation advances existing research by conceptualising gameful experience as an experiential bridge between brands and consumers within immersive digital ecosystems, while acknowledging the contextual influence of platform architecture. By demonstrating how experiential dimensions operate within the specific architecture of Roblox, the study provides a contextualised understanding of how platform design and psychological engagement mechanisms interact in shaping consumer–brand relationships.

A central implication emerging from the findings is that the effectiveness of branded games extends beyond the mere presence of game mechanics. Rather, it is the quality of the psychological states elicited during interaction that shapes consumer responses. This insight reinforces the relevance of the Gameful Experience (GAMEX) framework as a robust analytical lens for understanding experiential mechanisms in branded game environments.

6.2.Theoretical Implications

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the literature on gamification, branded games, and consumer–brand engagement by foregrounding the experiential dimension of gameful systems. While prior research has largely focused upon the structural characteristics of game elements, the present findings support a shift towards examining the psychological states elicited through interaction.

By adopting the GAMEX framework, this study reinforces the conceptualisation of gameful experience as a multidimensional experiential construct encompassing affective, cognitive, and motivational dimensions. The findings suggest that these dimensions operate collectively rather than independently, shaping an experiential ecosystem that mediates the relationship between interactive design and consumer brand responses.

Additionally, this research extends consumer behaviour theory by integrating insights from game studies and human–computer interaction. It demonstrates that experiential states such as absorption and creative thinking—traditionally examined within gaming contexts—are equally relevant for understanding consumer engagement and emotional attachment in branded environments.

The study therefore supports an experiential perspective on gamification and branded games, contributing to a more nuanced and psychologically grounded understanding of how interactive brand experiences influence consumer perceptions and behaviours.

Additionally, this study contributes to emerging discussions on immersive digital ecosystems by illustrating how platform architecture may function as a facilitating condition for experiential brand mechanisms. While not conceptualised as a formal moderating variable within the proposed framework, immersive and socially interactive platforms such as Roblox may intensify the effectiveness of gameful experience in shaping consumer responses. This contextual insight expands the theoretical understanding of how experiential processes unfold within contemporary digital environments.

Methodologically, this study contributes by applying and operationalising the GAMEX framework within a branded digital ecosystem, demonstrating its analytical relevance beyond traditional gaming contexts. This extension supports the framework's broader applicability in experiential marketing research.

Collectively, these contributions position gameful experience not merely as a design feature of branded games, but as a strategic experiential mechanism capable of shaping consumer–brand relationships within immersive digital environments.

While the study advances an experiential perspective on branded games, it does not empirically test causal relationships between specific experiential dimensions and measurable behavioural outcomes. Future research employing quantitative designs could further validate the mediating role of gameful experience within broader consumer engagement models. Therefore, the present contribution should be understood primarily as conceptual and exploratory rather than predictive.

6.3. Managerial Implications

The findings of this study offer several relevant implications for brand managers and digital strategists seeking to leverage immersive environments as part of their marketing strategies. In practical terms, this implies that brand managers should prioritise user journey mapping focused on experiential intensity rather than on reward frequency. For example, designing open-ended creative spaces, enabling avatar customisation aligned with brand symbolism, and fostering community-based interaction may generate deeper engagement than point-based incentive systems alone.

First, the results indicate that the success of branded game environments does not primarily depend on the mere incorporation of game mechanics. Rather, managers should prioritise experiential design by structuring branded environments around mechanisms that foster autonomy, creative agency, and sustained interaction rather than relying solely on reward-based gamification elements. The quality of the user's subjective experience is therefore more critical than the quantity of gamified features embedded within the

environment. Brands should move beyond surface-level gamification tactics and instead focus on designing coherent experiential journeys that meaningfully engage users.

Second, the alignment between experiential design and brand identity emerges as a decisive factor. The case of *Vans World* demonstrates how integrating core brand values—such as creativity, self-expression, and subcultural authenticity—into the mechanics and aesthetics of the digital environment can strengthen emotional resonance and brand coherence. Managers should ensure that immersive experiences reflect the symbolic and cultural dimensions of the brand, rather than treating branded games as isolated promotional tools.

Third, platform selection should be understood not merely as a distribution decision, but as a strategic experiential choice. Immersive ecosystems such as Roblox provide structural conditions that can amplify psychological engagement mechanisms through persistent interaction, user-generated content, and social connectivity (Gustavii, 2026). Consequently, managers should evaluate digital platforms according to their capacity to sustain interactive, participatory, and socially embedded experiences. The architecture of the platform may significantly influence the intensity and durability of consumer–brand relationships.

Fourth, engagement metrics should be interpreted as indicators of experiential effectiveness rather than solely as performance outputs. High visit rates, sustained interaction time, and active community participation—such as those observed in *Vans World*—suggest that immersive brand environments can generate meaningful forms of engagement that extend beyond traditional exposure-based metrics. Managers should therefore incorporate qualitative and experiential evaluation criteria alongside quantitative indicators when assessing digital brand initiatives.

Finally, brands targeting digitally native and youth-oriented audiences should recognise that immersive environments offer opportunities to participate in cultural ecosystems rather than simply deliver marketing messages. By fostering spaces for creativity, self-expression, and social interaction, branded experiences can evolve into platforms for community building and long-term relational engagement.

Overall, this study underscores the strategic importance of experiential design and platform architecture in shaping effective branded game environments. For practitioners, the key managerial challenge lies not in adding more game elements, but in crafting psychologically resonant experiences that align with brand identity and are embedded within structurally engaging digital ecosystems.

6.4.Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study is subject to several limitations that should be acknowledged.

This study is limited by its reliance on a single case study within a specific platform ecosystem. The findings are therefore context-bound and may not be directly generalisable to other industries, platforms, or brand categories. Furthermore, the absence of primary consumer data restricts the ability to empirically validate the psychological states inferred from the case analysis. Future research should incorporate mixed-method approaches, cross-platform comparisons, and experimental designs to strengthen the explanatory and predictive power of the proposed experiential framework.

First, the research adopts a Platform-specific ecosystem study design focused exclusively on Vans World. While this approach enables an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon, it limits the generalisability of the findings to other brands, platforms, or game genres.

Second, the exploratory and qualitative nature of the study relies on interpretative analysis rather than direct empirical measurement of consumer responses. Consequently, the findings reflect inferred experiential outcomes rather than self-reported perceptions or observed behavioural data.

Third, the study does not explicitly differentiate between player segments beyond general motivational tendencies. Factors such as age, gaming expertise, and cultural background may influence how gameful experiences are perceived and warrant further investigation.

Future research could address these limitations by employing quantitative or mixed-method approaches to empirically test the relationships between gameful experience dimensions and specific consumer brand outcomes, such as brand loyalty or purchase intention. Comparative studies across multiple branded games and industries would further enhance external validity. Additionally, longitudinal research could provide valuable insights into the long-term effects of gameful brand experiences, particularly as virtual environments and metaverse platforms continue to evolve.

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