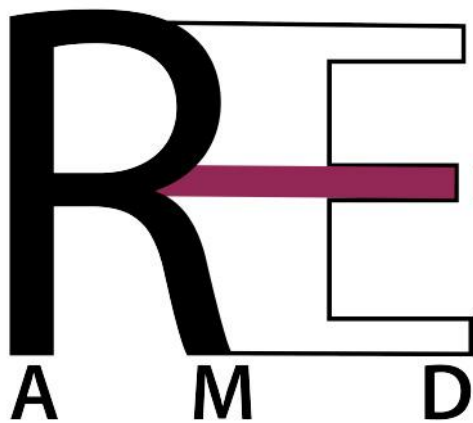




From Fabric to Code and from Code to Body: Skins, Fashion, and Language Apparatuses in Digital Games

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Introduction

This article examines skins in digital games as contemporary forms of dress mediated by technological and cultural apparatuses. Rather than treating skins as merely cosmetic additions to avatars or as isolated products of the digital economy, the study investigates how they reorganize practices of dressing, identity construction, symbolic consumption, visual performance, and material rematerialization across physical and digital environments. The central argument is that skins participate in a broader continuity of fashion culture: they translate historically established functions of dress into programmable visual systems and, in some cases, return to physical materiality through practices such as cosplay. From this perspective, digital fashion does not break with the material culture of clothing; it restructures the ways garments are produced, circulated, recognized, performed, and materially reconstructed.

1 Development

The article adopts a theoretical-analytical and qualitative approach based on an interdisciplinary literature review spanning fashion studies, material culture, technical images, digital games, representation, and technology. The discussion begins from the understanding of dress as a system of nonverbal communication through which subjects negotiate social position, belonging, taste, and identity. Bourdieu and Delsaut (1975), through the concepts of field, habitus, distinction, and symbolic capital, help explain how dress operates within socially structured systems of value. Simmel's (1988) account of fashion as a tension between imitation and differentiation further clarifies how garments mediate collective belonging while also enabling individual expression. Entwistle's (2000) emphasis on the dressed body introduces the performative dimension of clothing, showing that dress becomes socially meaningful through movement, bodily presence, and interaction. These perspectives provide the basis for extending the analysis of dressing to digital environments, where the avatar and the skin become central elements of visual presence.

The article then shifts from clothing as an object to the apparatuses that make digital clothing visible, operable, and socially meaningful. The notion of language apparatus is used to describe technical, cultural, and aesthetic

systems that organize the conditions under which images can appear, circulate, and be recognized. In this framework, a skin is not simply an image placed over an avatar. It depends on files, textures, rendering instructions, graphical engines, interfaces, menus, inventories, reward systems, purchasing mechanisms, and shared visual codes. Flusser's (2002) concept of technical images is relevant because skins are produced by programmed apparatuses and become visible through computational operations. Manovich's (2001) discussion of digital media further helps explain their modular, variable, and automated character. At the same time, Hall's (1997) theory of representation supports the argument that skins do not merely reflect identities that already exist; they participate in producing and communicating identity within the social environment of the game. Benjamin's (1987) reflections on technical reproducibility also allow the article to discuss the paradoxical production of rarity and exclusivity in digital systems, where an image may be technically reproducible while being economically restricted.

From this perspective, the game itself is understood as an apparatus that establishes the conditions of visibility of the skin. It determines what can be worn, how an appearance moves, how it is accessed, where it circulates, and how it may become associated with rarity, distinction, brands, events, or communities. The player does not dress the avatar through direct physical contact with fabric, but through commands, interfaces, programmed systems, and forms of access. This mediated act of dressing is central to the concept developed in the article: the amaterial circuit of skins. In dialogue with Álvaro Vieira Pinto (2005), amateriality is understood here as a relational process in which action is displaced from direct manual intervention toward systems, apparatuses, commands, and technical mediations. Applied to digital fashion, this perspective makes it possible to describe a non-linear circuit between fabric, code, image, and body. The skin may originate in material and stylistic references from fashion, become coded and rendered as a wearable image for an avatar, circulate through digital communities and economies, and later return to physical materiality in reconstructed garments and performances.

This circuit becomes especially visible in the relationship between fashion brands, digital games, and cosplay. The article discusses the growing investment of fashion companies in digital environments, including luxury

brands that create skins, virtual stores, collaborations, and hybrid collections. The collaboration between Louis Vuitton and Riot Games around League of Legends is used as a documented example of this convergence (Lolesports Staff, 2019; Redação Vogue, 2019). The partnership included branded skins associated with the virtual group True Damage, particularly for the characters Qiyana and Senna, and also extended the visual identity of the fashion house into the symbolic economy of the game. These collaborations demonstrate how symbolic capital associated with fashion can migrate into digital environments, where visual appearance functions as a marker of taste, access, belonging, and prestige. At the same time, following Pereira et al. (2024), the article distinguishes between digital goods that affect competitive performance and cosmetic skins whose primary function is expressive and symbolic. It is precisely this aesthetic and communicative dimension that brings skins closer to the cultural logic of dress.

Cosplay is treated as a particularly important interpretive key because it makes the return from code to body materially observable. The article does not present cosplay as an isolated empirical case, but as a cultural practice through which digitally programmed garments can be reconstructed through modeling, material selection, assembly, finishing, and bodily performance. Cosplayers mobilize technical, artisanal, project-based, and performative knowledge to translate visual signs from digital objects into textile and three-dimensional artifacts. This process is neither a mechanical copy nor a simple reproduction of the skin. It involves interpretation, adaptation to available materials, technical decisions, and individual aesthetic choices. Cosplay therefore reveals how digital vestments can circulate beyond the screen and become physical artifacts again, while preserving and transforming the symbolic meanings accumulated in the digital environment.

Conclusion

The analysis concludes that skins should be understood as contemporary forms of dress that operate simultaneously as technical images, interfaces, commodities, signs, and performative resources. Their importance lies in showing that the relationship between fashion and digital technology is

not based on the replacement of material dress by immaterial images. Instead, it involves a continual reorganization of materiality, visibility, symbolic value, and bodily presence. The amaterial circuit of skins describes this movement without reducing it to a linear sequence: fabric, code, image, body, consumption, performance, and community continuously feed one another. In this sense, the term skin itself is significant, since it names a digital garment through the metaphor of the body's surface. The study therefore argues that fashion is sufficiently consolidated as a field of material culture and symbolic capital to permeate technological devices and environments that were historically unimaginable, while maintaining the social functions of dressing as distinction, belonging, identity negotiation, and visibility. The article also emphasizes the pedagogical relevance of this discussion for Design and Fashion education, especially because generations already accustomed to digital games, virtual goods, and avatar-based forms of self-presentation increasingly occupy university classrooms. Understanding skins as language, apparatus, and dress can thus contribute to the formation of students capable of analyzing and designing for a field in which physical and digital practices of clothing are increasingly interconnected.

Keywords: skins; digital fashion; digital games; language apparatuses; cosplay.

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