“How many headshots you’ve done”: Achievement as discursive practice in videogame play

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ABSTRACT
In this paper I argue that achievement is a significant discourse in practice in videogame use. Drawing from Bauman’s (2001) discussion of an individualised society were progress is episodic and autonomous, and from phenomenological interviews with adult players I discuss how players use videogames to perform progress. The use of games as compensation for an otherwise unsatisfactory life reproduces new forms of progress, but these remain dependent on endless consumption of new technologies. This presents videogames as having a pacifying role that allows players to go on (buying) in the face of persistent failures to experience the progress ‘promised’ by consumer culture.

Author Keywords
Videogames, progress, consumption, achievement

INTRODUCTION
I want to explore achievement in videogames as what Holstein and Gubrium [13; 14] call interpretive practice. I don’t mean the sort of achievement that might be attributed to educational games (achievement as learning), or achievement as level structure – I’m concerned with something more reflective where we consider that individuals must establish a context in which their actions take place in order to account for them. I’m going to argue that adult players use videogames to perform the idea of achievement as individualised progress and that adults’ recognition of a need for a life in which things ‘get better’, but failure to fully actualise this need elsewhere in life, may frame their experience of videogame use. I’ll start by considering why achievement as progress may have become significant for discursive practice in videogame use before reviewing the lived experience of adult players. I then want to consider the broader implications of the meaning making that I have described.

PLAY AND PROGRESS IN AN INDIVIDUALISED SOCIETY
According to Desmond’s history of consumer behaviour [7] the Enlightenment is responsible for shaping a consumer society that emphasises increases in living standards through the accumulation of goods because it has placed a focus on rationalism to produce a dominant discourse of progress (a forward moving trajectory of identifiable improvements) as a form of meaning making.

Such a sentiment also informs contemporary views of play (see Sutton-Smith [24]). Play as progress presents play as having a developmental role. For example, play is how infants learn to be ‘useful’ adults. However an implication of such a conceptualisation is that for a ‘fully developed’ adult play should be redundant. For instance we see this in Barber’s [1] diagnosis of an infantilised culture where videogames stand as an example of the corruption of economic progress. Chick sums up the logic here: “*play is essentially a juvenile activity and* […] *the retention of neonatal characteristics into adulthood results in playful behaviour throughout the adult lifespan*” [5]. Adult play is reduced to problematic retained childishness and results in our modern use of euphemisms such as hobbies, recreation, or pastimes to describe adult play. Implicitly, adult progress and meaning in life should be through the work that child play prepared them for.

The dominance of this understanding of play is probably responsible for the problems many non-players of videogames have in accepting that this might be a ‘normal’ adult activity [17], let alone a location for progress. Play as developmental progress subordinates play to other purposes, positioning play as ‘not real’, but simply about real things, or practice for real life [21; 24]. Adults must therefore ‘get on with’ the real purpose of life through social and economic achievements. However Cohen and Taylor [6] provide illustration of the care we might take when dismissing adult play in this way. In the second edition of *Escape Attempts* they reflect that they previously contrasted ‘escapes’ (play) with ‘paramount reality’ (the routines of work and domestic life) and therefore presented play in opposition to ‘real’ life. Yet the escapes undertaken by individuals actually seem to be more to do with what their life is about than the routines of paramount reality such that we might want to equally argue that play is the prime location for ‘real’ life.

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So how might we resolve the tension between adult work and adult play as locations for progress-projects? If progress should be about increasing standards of living through economic growth, how do adults account for videogames – a type of retained childishness – as meaningful experience? We might expect them to reject their play, or excuse it as insignificant, yet like Cohen and Taylor, we often find the opposite. This problematises the practice of progress.

Historical shifts in the emphasis of consumption may be one way to understand reasons for apparent changes in the location of progress. According to Lee [16] the era of growth in the US between the turn of the century and the 1960s resulted from high wages being paid to those undertaking the divided labour necessary for efficient manufacturing to allow such workers to afford the products of mass production. The social system created by Henry Ford's car plant is typical of this arrangement where workers bought newly affordable mass-produced goods promoted to them by the media, thereby recognising that better lifestyles could be achieved through acquisition of commodities that were worked for. Consumer goods became established as an attractive 'escape' from the dull routines of work with their promise of progress through higher living standards.

This system required changes in ways of thinking about progress. Here Gabriel and Lang [9] note that the central justification for the organising of society around capitalism is individual 'choice'. Rational consumer choice drives efficiency in markets, encourages innovation and drives down costs such that the importance of individual choice is emphasised. A better life for all is realised through competitive markets if we all just choose wisely. The 'consumer as rational chooser' was therefore central to a discourse of progress that presents consumption as an activity that must be taken seriously. Yet Fordism also represented a period of homogenised products for standard lifestyles, and as markets became saturated, growth in production could not be sustained by increases in demand. From Cohen and Taylor's [6] perspective, it is easy to see individuals coming to recognise consumption as simply a new and mundane routine part of life. The promise of (economic) progress through consumption was in danger, as what were once sign of progress and status became the norm (c.f. [19]). We have therefore witnessed a move away from satisfaction through 'useful' commodities and towards novel experiences.

Here, technology has also become central to discourses of progress [23]. In general the narrative is that technology moves society towards perfection, overcoming any problems along the way, and so a new era of ICT-based business promised a way out of the fixed structures of Fordism (see [15] for example). In order to maintain progress through economic growth and improved living standards based on increasing consumption in this post-Fordism era, constant innovation was required. The result is a never-ending series of new and spectacular consumption experiences. This playful turn in consumer culture produced themed shops, malls and restaurants (for example see [10], and especially [20]) and many 'staged' tourist activities [29], as well as a rise in software and other knowledge-based commodities, together producing what is now referred to as 'experience economies' [18]. A similar perspective provided by Hunnicutt's [14] history of Western leisure is that work is no longer a primary location for meaning in life – that role is now given to leisure consumption. For Fiske [8] this instills a preference for newness as an economic necessary and an ideology that encourages individuals to be 'up to date'. However such a way of seeing the world is attractive to some more than others. Fiske notes, for example, that it was the absence of meaningful work that lead women to seek fashion as a form of progress. For Fiske (professional) men tended to have 'goal orientated jobs' where progress is more obvious to them. Women however, were required to establish conditions in which they may be in control of such experience and this lead to acts of resistance that changed what was capable of representing progress. Although progress remains an important discourse in practice, discursive practice continues to reproduce this in new forms, including through consumption. Another example of this is Campbell's analysis of the 'craft consumer' who primarily uses acts of consumption to '*realise their potential and express their true selves'* [3]. Again, when work denies experiences of progress, individual seek new ways to experience it.

For Desmond [7]) a central theme in such narratives is the development of individualism and Bauman [2] also argues that the social trends sign-posted above have resulted in a reduction in societal control in favour of individual rights and responsibilities. Bauman argues that whereas previous 'top heavy' modernism placed responsibility for progressive change on society as a whole, recent 'bottom heavy' modernism places responsibility on the individual to make decisions to better their own circumstance. Progress now reflects self-confidence of the present - that 'time is on our side' and that 'we are in control' and for those who don't have it is most felt as a 'lack of agency able to move the world forward', [2]. In anthropology Turner [28] notes a similar move from liminal (group and traditional) rituals to liminoid (individual and autonomous) rituals. So this trend is a well-documented concern. The myth of progress has produced a perpetual state of individual striving (rather than collective work towards a better future) leading to an 'episodic life' [2] where events are seen for there own merits, but are unconnected. Bauman's further complaint here is that his produces a desire for instant gratification that stems from a lack of security and feeling of purpose in life.

We therefore have a society structured according to grand projects of economic and social progress supported by individual, rational choice, but individuals who are no

longer able to locate themselves within such projects and are left floundering and desperate for activities in which some sense of individual achievement may be experienced. Then more specifically the market – especially in the form of seductive playful technology – is seen as a potential resource for such projects

VIDEOGAMES AND EXPERIENCES OF PROGRESS.

Between June and October 2006 I spent time talking with 24 adult videogame players in the South of England, aged between 18 and 57. I recorded approximately 50 hours of interviews. My approach was phenomenological (in line with similar approaches in consumer research [27; 25; 26; 11]) focusing on the lived experience of players and on their broader life-worlds rather than just their in-game activities. Here I draw from those interviews to provide first-person descriptions of themes relating to progress and achievement. Then as Holstein and Gubrium [13] suggest, I consider broader critical insights, making distinctions between discursive practice (the lived experience) and discourse in practice (the 'traditions' with which people think) and thereby highlighting that social discourse is a resource for and a result of everyday practice.

As adults talk about videogames frequent reference is made to having '*done something worthwhile'*, or '*achieved something'*, often in recognition of accusations that videogames are trivial (especially for adults). Players may therefore be well aware of a tension that requires them to reconcile playing games with 'normal' adult behaviour. More than this, they also provide accounts of a number of ways in which their engagement with videogames may be experienced as something like individualised, autonomous progress and this is my focus here.

I identified three overlapping themes present in the stories adult videogame players told. Firstly, players may note that consoles and games are constantly 'getting better', and hence are able to see them as evidence for technological progress. For some this is elaborated by engagement with retro games and consoles. We might see these activities as 'traditional' ways in which commodities may allow for experiences of progress – videogames as a fashion system.

In the second theme players note that either videogame use presents them with signs of achievement through the accumulation of 'more', or alternatively allows them to make something from nothing, producing a sense of achievement as a form of 'craft' consumption. This virtualized achievement is perhaps a departure from the established ways in which consumption acts perform progress.

Finally, videogame play may also be experienced as either 'balancing out' other negative experiences, especially from work, or avoiding experiences of boredom. These more negative frames may be seen as evading 'stagnation' in life and represent the ongoing struggle individuals may have to experience progress.

Videogame commodities as progress

Videogames may be bought as part of a broader interest in technological progress and this positions videogames as 'just one more' new and desirable commodity. As such players may eagerly anticipate purchasing new game-related technologies and/or may enjoy comparisons with older, 'inferior' consoles.

For example Luke, a 29-year-old single web developer awaits the latest console. He lives in a modern flat and places great emphasis on the technology that he owns (especially his car, audiovisual and computer equipment). He is able to provide a history of the consoles he has owned, from early Nintendo systems, through the first Playstation and then more recently a Gamecube, followed by his current Xbox. He recalls Gamecube games as being the '*best he has played'*, but tells me that he won't '*go back'* to them, despite being bored with his Xbox collection. Although he acknowledges that there are games on both the Xbox and Gamecube that he is yet to play, he prefers to anticipate something new:

> *I was going to get a PS3, but they've pushed the date back now, until March or something […].So I don't know, I'm a bit disheartened 'cause there aren't any new Xbox games, well there are, but they're all ported from 360 from what I can see. And I don't know, I don't know whether to go and get a 360, or be patient…. Well, I should look at the Xbox games I haven't played, but they're old now, and I'm kind of thinking this is not the optimum experience I'm getting now, I'm getting the leftovers…. like I said before, for me it's about keeping on top of it, getting the latest thing and seeing what the technology can do. […], so I don't think there is anything that will blow me away at the moment. Until I get a PS3 or something.*

Luke's anticipation is such that it makes him restless and discontent with both his current and preferred technology because neither represents the 'latest thing' and engagement with them would therefore feel like a backward step. The promise of a new console and games however, literally allows Luke to look forward to the future.

Malcolm provides another account. Malcolm lives with his wife and teenage children in rural Dorset. A large TV, AV equipment, Xbox 360, Sky+ box, and DVD recorder dominate his living room. He also owns an expensive PC, Nintendo DS and PDA. Malcolm explains that he is '*into technology generally'* and games fit well with this. He explains that he bought the Xbox 360 because he was interested in the '*extended functionality'*, including use as a media player, (even though it is seldom used to play music). It is also networked, yet Malcolm explains that he is yet to try online play. A good part of my time with Malcolm focused on the technologies themselves. Malcolm is interested in what technology is capable of and anticipates new developments through online forums and magazines.

> *I take as much interest in the hardware as I do the software to be honest and what it can do and what I can plug into it and what it can be made to do and things like that. I'm interested in the technology involved and I that's why I like to see the graphics. I like to see what it can do. And I think with the 360 I don't think we've seen half of what it can do.*

Malcolm also explained that he has an extensive collection of old consoles and software, yet he is quickly bored by both old and new games. For Malcolm then, games as a hobby is more about collecting and comparing technology than about playing. He tells me about his collection at length, carefully noting the condition and value of key items and placing them in their historical context. Later technologies are explained in terms of improvement over earlier one and it quickly becomes clear that this collection is extensive and ongoing:

> *A lot of them are in the shed, some are in the loft, and they are kind of spread out…. Spectrums, we must have nine or ten Spectrums, 2 or 3 SNESs, several Master Systems, a couple of Ataris, an Amiga, the Xbox is out there, 5 Playstations in all the various incarnations.[…] The Spectrums are boxed, in the original black box and with the Horizons tape and that, yeah, I keep those nice, but the other consoles we play around with[…]. It's got to be literally over the years I must have spent thousands on them.*

Other players accumulated collections of several hundred games and consoles. Although some claimed that they simply didn't get round to selling old games, for others collecting becomes as important as playing. The complexity of and rapid changes in the market provides a suitable context for developing a collection that is experienced as a project of achieving something 'complete' and 'special' as well as a visible sign of technological progress. Collectors also note the investment potential of old consoles and part of the pleasure for some is to monitor the worth of their collections on sites such as eBay and hence see collecting as a form of economic progress. Conversations with collectors tended to focus on both technologies and value.

These practices represent the traditional way in which individualised consumption is an enactment of progress through a fashion system. By being able to either observe technological improvements, or by aiming for some 'ideal' and appreciating collection, both Malcolm and Luke are able to manage a sense in which life is experienced as better than before. However, we may see this management process extend into play itself.

Recognising achievement in videogame play

Other players noted that a sense of accomplishment is something that differentiates videogames from other media consumption, or even from other aspects of their daily lives. For example Alex is a 40 year-old, experienced gamer and qualified optician who currently stays at home to look after two school-aged children. This arrangement leaves him with plenty of free time for videogames. After reviewing his favourite games he attempts a considered explanation of how they present a pleasurable experience of progress:

> *I mean they're all about amassing things aren't they? How many headshots you've done, how many tanks you've built, how many countries you've invaded, you know? It's like seeing the noughts in your bank account, there is pleasure in seeing them tick over, or your milometer tick over in the same way that there is pleasure in going from 9999 experience points to you know the next level, so games like those they give you - the joy is in saying right, this is what I've amalgamated within the game.*

Alex notes that the point in games is that through a process of understanding how to progress, a player gains a sense of both control and recognition of their achievements that are immediately visible. So games are good for producing experience of achievement and as a result allow for performances of 'progress' in adults' lives. There is also a suggestion that the attraction is the speed and ease with which markers of achievement are realised. Luke also notes something like this 'instant' gratification:

> *To some extent if you want to be at the top of the NBA, or whatever you can do it in a game, probably in a weekend, whereas in life all you are going to hit is rejection and well you might succeed, but the chances are small. So in the game you can achieve it, you know it's achievable; it's not just a pipe dream, sort of thing.*

This process seems consistent with the criticisms of our culture that work is experienced as unrewarding for many, and that leisure consumption has become a space for where we should experience pleasure, particularly in the accumulation of 'more' [2; 22]. Others players also articulated a type of play that seemed to be a specific desire to achieve a skill that might be otherwise beyond them – or at least not possible in the time available. For example Carl is a 41 year-old married learning technologist. As we talk he frequently notes that his job is boring (with repetitive tasks most days) and offers little scope for creativity. He then explains at length his desire to create things in a game.

> *In the world we live in often there is very little opportunity to create.* […] *My wife is actually quite a good artist,* […] *and when we got married she introduced me to that, but I am abysmal [laughs], you would not recognise what I paint, even as abstract art.* [...] *But within a game I can actually create something and I can do it in the comfort of my own home, when I want, I can save it and come back to it. All the artistic stuff in the way it looks is actually done for me so it's Lego* […] *I mean it will always look the same, the same boxy squares, now you take Command and Conquer, or Generals to a certain extent, I'm just starting to play that, or Sim City, it will always look*

> *the same, but what you've got is the ability to vary what you have created* […]. *I am actually taking nothing and creating something that if I play with it will actually last.*

Here Carl articulates a sense of agency, explaining in detail the elaborate worlds *he* has built and then managed, and recognising that here he has started with nothing and then created '*something worthwhile*'. Grant, a 26 year-old single computer technician who works in a high street computer retailer also explains a pleasure in making things in games and contrasts this with his dull and frustrating job where he deals with endless similar computer problems for frustrated and unappreciative customers. He describes the pleasure he gets from modding and therefore creating new and better games through a series of small improvements.

> *I like Stargate… and there's a group of people at the moment who are very skilled in 3D objects, recreating all the ships, doing all the textures and I'm just helping at the moment, I'm getting all the sounds, getting all the weapons right so that we can then release them to the world to play for free…. I've been trying to change the look of the game, the graphics, the menu system, the weapons for all the ships. At the moment I'm learning how to put another race into a game […]. The appeal is probably more building the stuff than actually having the battle.*

These last two examples demonstrate something of the potential for 'craft' consumption [3] in videogame use and therefore perhaps a more positive reading of play than the performance of material accumulation or instant gratification. In the case of Grant there is even the possibility of some communal experience from his modding. Yet even in these examples we see that players quite deliberately seek experiences in videogames that contrast with a lack of achievement elsewhere in life. We see compensations then, and a desire to experience achievement not in life as a whole, but in transient episodes of play.

Avoiding stagnation through play

The desire for compensation for other 'failures' in progress may be more pressing for some such that it is perhaps balance, rather than progress that is sought. Here the behaviour is reactive to negative feelings. We may see a type of cathartic play, expressed as '*needing to play*' to '*get something out of your system*'. Recognition of occasional stresses of work and family life that cannot be immediately dealt with produce attempts to displace negative feelings through play. Stephen, an affluent married production manager in his late thirties provides an account of this:

> *I think playing the games has some form of therapeutic… […]. Sarah will be getting home from work and having a shower or whatever and she will hear me swearing and she can never understand why I'm playing it if it's creating that much anger, you know, you are supposed to be playing it to enjoy it, and I don't know, I think it's because quite often you know, I'll have a bad day at work or something and when you do well in it you do feel very good about yourself.*

Here Stephen goes on to note that it is important to choose the right game for this task. Occasionally, games are too hard and make things worse. At other times a game that is too easy results in no feeling of achievement. In addition games may become too easy with repeated play and the result is a need to replace games with new ones to sustain feelings of achievement. The result is a process of management of feelings of worth and achievement through consumption and play.

For others the problems that games are seen as a solution to may be more enduring, requiring even more careful management. Stuart, a 57 year old academic, provides a detailed account of the way in which games – in this case *Morrowind* – may compensate for ongoing and complex problems at work:

> *I played a lot. What I did is every time I had trouble with my boss; in the evening I would just go knock shit out of somebody in the game [laughs]…. It is actually cathartic in the sense that you realise, obviously you are not schizophrenic, so you realise that it's a game, it's a system, it's a world in which you have control, rather than, well the thing that stresses most people is not how difficult or how hard their work is, it's how little control they have in their life…. So it's the illusion that you have control over a small world. It's nothing to do with megalomania, it's to do with achieving something and being recognised for what you have achieved.*

In a later interview Stuart tells me more about his negative feelings about his job and the role of games in 'compensating' for this:

> *Well in a game, if you do well or badly, depends on you. At work there was little I could do to change things […]. I think the control has more to do with not so much following the quest, but achieving objectives, I'm an objective orientated person. I've always believed in objectives…. And you know you look at what you've got to do, figure out a way of doing it and if you don't achieve it you can reload the game and try again, you can't do that in life [laughs]. So it's more to do with setting yourself objectives, or having someone set an objective for you, and managing to achieve those objectives.*

Players may find that when they are not in control of life games help them to cope. They report times when life is more than just 'routinely stressful', and when events of the day leave them angry or frustrated they look to games to relieve stress in a way that often provides a sense of achievement that everyday life has persistently undermined

or denied them. Here we might consider that progress is so lost to the individual that balancing out negative experiences is good enough for them.

Finally, at times individuals describe having spare time that creates a pressure to do something. Here achievement through leisure seems to be almost an obligation. With no clear aims individuals suffer almost instant boredom as a form of 'pleasure angst' and may seek out games as a solution to this feeling of not wanting to do nothing. Richard, a 30 year-old marketing executive explains that he is '*easily bored*' and needs to use his leisure time productively, to '*achieve*' something rather than '*waste time*':

> *There are quite often times in my life, evenings or a weekend where I'm waiting for something to happen, or I'm going to go somewhere, I've got time to fill, so I'll use it as a time filler[…]. I've got half an hour, I can turn the Xbox on have a quick nine holes on Tiger Woods, or you know, I can actually be somewhere, you know at the rugby pitch, and forty minutes later I can finish, […] so in small amounts of time, you can achieve something.*

These examples (and to some degree earlier ones too) represent a recognition that life may thwart ambition either by failure in personal goals, or because there simply isn't an immediate goal, just boredom and the possibility of achieving nothing. At such times videogames may allow feelings to be managed. We may also note the episodic nature of such activity. Again, achievement isn't some grand plan, but a series of small events, helpfully structured by the latest game releases.

VIDEOGAMES AND INDIVIUALISED, EPISODIC PROGRESS

Bauman's [2] 'bottom up' modernism suggests that individuals can no longer look to society to 'make things right' but are required to take responsibility for a belief that things are getting better. He also suggests a tendency for instant gratification in the solutions to the problem of progress. And elsewhere this is confirmed as one seductive role for consumption. We may witness these things in the stories provided by adult videogame consumers where episodic progress is experienced as a series of new technologies or in-game achievements. In this article then, I have examined the discursive practice of videogame consumption in light of Bauman's narrative of progress. The idea of progress is used to account for actions, and is therefore also re-produced through those actions.

Progress is understood by individuals as one way of making sense of their lives. Yet the promise of achievements – of a life of progress – may be denied them. Work may be simply dull and frustrating, for example. This presents individuals with the problem of how to experience a sense of achievement that makes life meaningful. Leisure may be seen as the location for such activity, but even here there is 'pleasure angst' – a worry of not getting enough from limited free time. The videogames market emerges as a potential solution if managed skillfully.

Game commodities represent technological progress with a series of new and improved consoles offering better sound, improved graphics, new functionality and (more elusively) better game play. For some the contrast may be extended by engagement with older consoles. However, although an interest in 'retro' games may be taken as a rejection of progress, for the collectors I spoke to it seemed that they were more a way to plot their lives against a series of more advanced consoles, or to gain satisfaction as their collection (and its value) grows. Yet for others it is the ability to hold in mind the promise of new games and new consoles that ensures that life may be measured as improving. Each console is understood as better than the last and a new generation of machines eventually results in players losing interest in their current games as 'out dated'.

Progress is also an idiom used to capture the experience of play, and videogames may be structured so that it is easy for players to see achievements as accumulation. As this 'more-is-better' type of progress is a key driver of consumer culture manifest since Fordism it is perhaps not surprising that within games we also see consumer-like mechanisms. At times these are the acquisition of virtual consumer goods; a bigger home containing more desirable commodities in *The Sims* or *Animal Crossing*, for example, or a better car with more modifications in *Need for Speed*. At other times the accumulation of 'stuff' remains apparent, but the virtual goods are magic artifacts in *World of Warcraft*, or the spaceships in *Eve Online* (all described by the players I spoke to). Even where commodities are absent an ever-increasing score confirms an aesthetic 'performance' of achievement, revealing that a visible accumulation of more is a criteria understood to measure progress.

Videogames may offer others the chance to actualise what is otherwise not possible, or practical, for example games allow for creativity in lives without such opportunity at work and for players who may lack skill in art or other creative leisure. We see this particularly in 'god games', such as *Civilization*, or *Command and Conquer*, and also in resource management games such as *Theme Park Tycoon* that require players to make a structure at least partly from their imagination. Such 'craft consumption' may be seen as an alternative to progress as accumulation. Within the apparent confines of a consumer culture, it is perhaps a creative appropriation of technology to achieve life's goals including creative praxis and peer recognition for labour. But as Bauman [2] predicts, this is also a form of instant gratification that lacks long-term commitment. It remains episodic and bracketed from paid work as a form of leisure consumption.

On a daily basis we may also witness players seemingly 'defeated' by their work who banish feelings that the day has 'not gone well' with a period of intense individual play.

Again, it's the easy accessibility of videogames that makes them attractive. Games are chosen that may be picked up in an instant. For example, a few races on *Gran Turismo* compensates for an hour in traffic, or a few levels of *Halo* compensates for a bad meeting, argumentative customers or another row at home – as long as the game is new enough to offer a challenge, but not so hard that it produced just another failure. Success in the game then balances other failings and we may therefore also see the apparent powerlessness of the individual to have a broader impact on the world. Instead of confronting the political and social structure that may somehow be responsible for life's failings, the player retreats to carefully managed spaces where feelings of control are easily accessed as episodic play.

Finally, in a society that demands action and abhors stagnation having noting to do becomes unacceptable and experiential consumption in the form of videogames is a solution. Here players avoid the boredom, or 'pleasure angst' of potentially wasteful free time with experiences that allow for some sense of purpose, or achievement. This seems to be a curious manifestation of a work ethic that originated from a strong sense of the need for economic progress.

The use of games as compensation for an unsatisfactory life is quite different from claims that games may be transformatory, for example by developing strategies for actions in the material world, or what Silverstone refers to as a 'flight simulator for the everyday' [21]. Rather than transform everyday routine, games seem to help players to deal with it, presenting what Castronova [4] describes as 'a few moments of actual joy' in videogames as having a pacifying role in society. There *is* resistance to normative structures where players explicitly reject the frivolousness of adult play and creatively use it to produce personal narrative of progress. However what isn't so easily resisted is the idea of progress itself. Videogames may not help with this more ambitious reflective task. In re-producing ideas of progress in both their use and accumulation videogames perpetuate a life-world that rejects simplicity, or continuity, for example, and supports the idea of technology as solution to life's ills. In allowing player to experience progress, games reinforce a need for progress and a complex technological marketplace to cater for that need.

Only one of the players that I spoke to seemed to recognise this problem and this lead to a rejection of games. Dick, a 24-year-old postman, ex-soldier, and experienced videogame player confessed that he is '*playing less games now*' and expressed some regret at the time be has wasted on them. In accounting for why, he explains that he has started reading philosophy and practising Buddhist meditation. He notes that this change in his life conflicts with his previous videogame playing habits:

> [The reason] *I don't play them so much is because I know that when you're playing a game and you are sucked into this void, this complete non-entity of a world, you're not thinking about your actual body and your actual person and that's why you do things like that. You can't be mindful when there's so much going on because you're concentrating and that's why I think it's bad, because from a Buddhist point of view you are concentrating on something to the exclusion of reality.*

Dick's understanding of Buddhism is to reject striving and therefore the idea of progress and he understands this as a conflict with the experience of using videogames. Of course videogames are not alone here. Indeed they are just one of many leisure activities that require endless buying of new equipment in return for the promise of instant and individual progress. However videogames may be especially flexible and compelling in the way they allow these things. They are accessible and seductive in a way that may account for their popularity. They may even replace other 'craft' consumption practices with more spectacular simulations where progress is quicker (for example *Guitar Hero* rather than learning to play a guitar; virtual rather than physical sports, etc). They may therefore represent a cutting edge of not just technology, but of individualised, instant market solutions to the dull and hopeless routines of modern work and domestic life. Dick's account raises another issue though; if videogames are to be about something other than episodic progress what must they be like? And if videogames could be made that reject progress in favour of other discourse in practice would a videogames industry be interested in such a project? And even if they were, would such games sell?

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